

**digit**

March 2008

# Fast Track *to*

# THE WEB

*Advanced*

Office Online

Blogging

Online Image Editors

File Sharing

Online Social Networking Sites

Software Downloads

Reviews

Tech Help

Online Services



thinkfree



YOUR HANDY GUIDE TO EVERYDAY TECHNOLOGY

# Fast Track to **The Web**

Section II  
**Advanced**

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By Team Digit

# Credits

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**March 2008**

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# World In A Browser

Last month, the focus of our *Fast Track to The Web* was the PC—how to get it connected to the Internet, and all the essential software you need for your online activities—browsing the Web, chatting with friends and so on. This month, we explore all that you can do online—you’d be surprised at what you can accomplish with just a browser!

No doubt you’ve heard of—if not actually used—the many online office suites that claim to threaten Microsoft Office’s position in the office application category. Google recently added Presentation to its offering, completing the Holy Trinity of documents, spreadsheets and presentations. Zoho’s been around for a while, and new features are added every day. Not as prominent is ThinkFree, which impressed us nonetheless. In the first chapter, you’ll get what you need to start using these applications.

Once you’re done with business, you can indulge in a pleasure that so many people are—blogging. Blogging engines give you a platform to create a spiffy new blog in minutes, and if you still can’t come to terms with them, Chapter 2 will reveal All. We’ve also looked at the new “microblogging” engines, that don’t demand as much of your time—just a short quip about what you’re up to, and that’s it!

There’s been a lot of talk of an online version of Adobe Photoshop lately, but while we wait for that, other players have started offering us easy-to-use, free, online image editors that’ll even send your photos to services like Flickr or Picasa when you’re done editing them!

That done, you can participate in the activity that’s hogging the majority of the world’s collective bandwidth—file sharing! Whether it’s BitTorrent, eMule, Gnutella or Direct Connect—if it’s controversial activity you hanker for, this is your primer.

And finally, from the deep, dark trenches of the Web, we’ve dug out services and Web sites that’ll give you software advice, reviews, and even a friendly hand when things go wrong.

So get that browser window open now!

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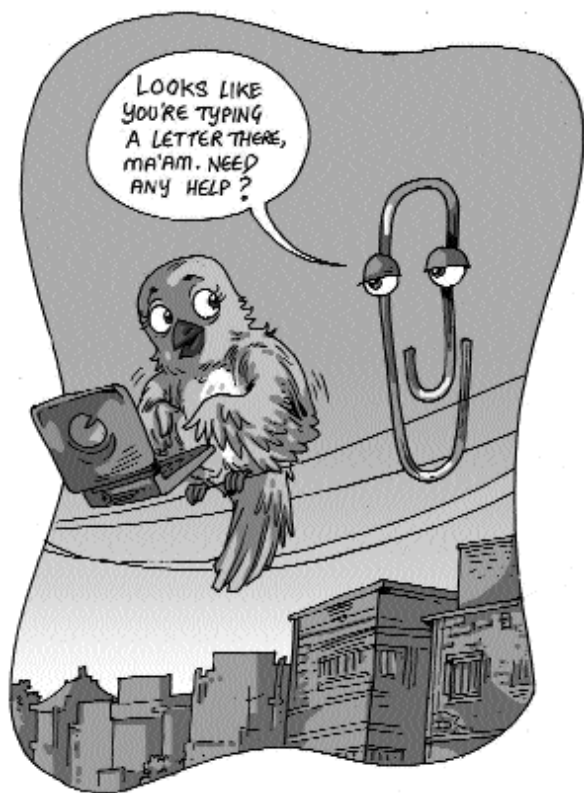
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# Office Online



So what's the need of today's netizen? Uninterrupted work—whenever, wherever! Behold! The answer lies once again with the Internet. Among the needs of this fast-moving generation are word processing software, spreadsheets and presentations. We dwelled among possible alternatives for the rush-hour guy and came across three websites that serve this rising need. Google is one (no prizes for guessing that!). The other site is Zoho.com, and the third is Thinkfree.com.



## 1.1 Google Docs

Under the Google Documents umbrella of offerings comes three vital services—Documents, Spreadsheets and Presentations. Understandably, these are alternatives to MSWord, Excel and PowerPoint, respectively. So how do we go about using them?

### 1.1.1 Google Documents

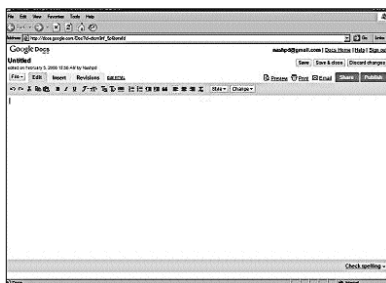
As most of you probably know, one needs a universal Google account that can be used across all Google services. This means that in case you use Gmail then you already possess the prerequisites. To start off with the Google Docs suite, start off by visiting the URL <http://docs.google.com>, and enter your user ID and password.

To get a feel of how the online office suites function, start off with the word processor, also known as Documents. Just below the logo on the top left of the screen that says Google Docs Beta, you can see a drop down menu which says New. Once you click on New, you are given either of four options; namely, a new Document (Word), Spreadsheet (Excel), Presentation (PowerPoint) or Folder. We will first try out the Document Function—go to New > Document.

If you have ever used Microsoft Word, you would be able to sail through effortlessly. As you would have figured out by now, the blank page with the cursor is the beginning of your document.

You could continue typing in your leisure as much as you require. Similar to Gmail, Google Docs periodically saves the changes made, which comes in quite handy. In fact, keyboard shortcuts are similar to Microsoft Word, thereby giving you a feel of working on Word itself. You can adjust font sizes with the button marked “T”. Most of the functionalities here are similar to MS Word. Once your document is complete, the next step is saving.

Now consider this—you get a word processor, with password pro-

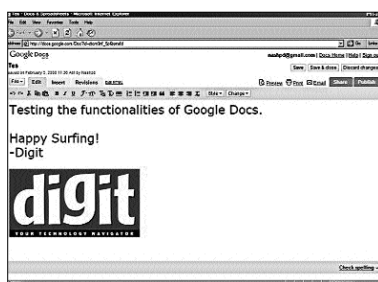


**A blank new document on Google Documents**

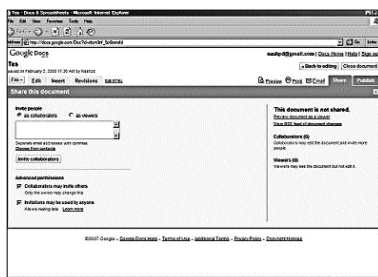
tection, data storage, and to top it all, an option to save it either in .rtf, open office, .zip, Word, and even .pdf formats. Another important function here is that these documents can be shared online. Data could be added by your chosen users—all you need to do is invite them to use this document. You can set their privileges similar to the way you do for a shared folder in Windows—for example, deciding on who gets permission to read and who gets permission to write. This speeds up the process of data compilation from multiple sources, yet maintaining security. The Insert tab lets you insert objects to make your document more lively.

The Revisions tab keeps a track of every change made to your document—both by you and those who you have shared your document with. That's the best part, because as the owner of this document, you can then track any error that may have crept in and isolate it, without having to correct other areas of the document. For example, if you first typed a word, a friend deleted it and then a second friend added it again. You may have been (verbally) informed of the deletion, but not of the re-addition. You would get all the relevant information from the revisions tab along with a time stamp. To the right hand side of the page, are two vital tabs, namely, Share and Publish. Click on the Share tab to share your document.

As you would see, from the window, there are two options: “as collaborators” and “as viewers”. Collaborators are those with special privileges to change the data just like you, while viewers are those who have no permission to write, but rather just read. Let us con-



Google Docs also lets you add images



Share your documents with all your friends

sider an example: the principal of an institute wants to release the results of a recently conducted test, and fast—everything's already overdue. There is a tremendous amount of data to be compiled. Conventional office suites would require one person like a data entry operator to key in the marks of each student for each subject—this can be time consuming. It is in situations such as these that online office suites come in handy. They can be time-saving in data segregation from multiple sources. The easiest way would be to start a Google Document session. She could then invite the teachers as collaborators, who would enter the marks in the respective fields. At the end she could invite all the students as viewers.

The next important function on Google Docs is Publish. Clicking on this gives the document a unique URL, whereby anyone can view it.

Google Docs also empowers you with the option of publishing your document right away as a blog! This gives a reasonably brief idea of using Google documents, the first alternative to the typical MS Word processor. One must note that this is in fact just the tip of the iceberg. Let us analyse another tool by Google which would serve as an alternative to MS Excel.

### 1.1.2 Google Spreadsheets

Spreadsheets have literally been controlling our lives for long. Either directly or indirectly, we have all been associated and affected by them. Project management, budget and resource allocation, attendance sheets, payrolls, household expenses... spreadsheets are inevitable. Besides, the numerous formulae incorporated into professional spreadsheets that have made the lives of those who use them a lot easier all this while, are now difficult to do away with. Now picture this. Your spreadsheet is shared among a team, with each team member entering data fields relevant to him / her. This would significantly expedite the time required for updating data. Similar to Google documents, you need to get to the Google Docs homepage with your Google account.

In the same way that we started off with Google Documents, go to New > Spreadsheets to begin.

The toolbar resembles that of MS Excel, with slight differences.

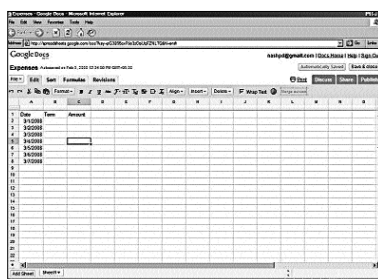
Let us take the basic example of a spreadsheet, in say, home budgeting. Similar to MS Excel, you could enter the cell values as shown.

You'll need to set a date format first. This can be done by selecting the cells and clicking on the drop down button "Format". You will be provided alternate date formats from which you can easily select the one you are most comfortable working with. Start off by entering all the relevant data fields such as the recent expenses, the amount spent, the date, or amounts received from an external source. The screenshot gives a typical budgeting worksheet.

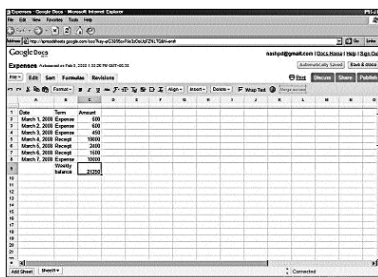
Google Spreadsheets comes complete with support for numerous formulae that make life much easier. To get a fair idea of how the value in this case was calculated, click on the Formula tab. If you are not familiar with the various formulae at your disposal, then you can learn by yourself with the help documentation provided by Google. Clicking on the Formula tab gives you a better understanding of the formula used.

The screenshot captures precisely this specific area. As you can see, the formula used was  $C9 = \text{sum}(C5 : C7) - \text{sum}(C2 : C4)$ . The value displayed in cell C9 is 21350. Another interesting function is GoogleLookup—move over VLOOKUP and HLOOKUP in good old MS Excel!

For those of you aware of the VLOOKUP and HLOOKUP functions in MS Excel, this would be a blessing indeed. However, those of you who are not aware of the lookup function, it is a function



Spreadsheet's functionalities resemble MS Excel



Ready to budget your expenses on the go; as and when you remember transactions, just key them in!

used often in large spreadsheets to “look up” specific data values in a cell and depending on the value, a given operation is executed. This reduces the burden on the user to actually sift through piles of data wondering what has to be changed in all directly and indirectly dependent spreadsheets. With the GoogleLookup function, Google spreadsheets would actually look up the World Wide

Google Docs  
Expenses  
Autosaved on Feb 5, 2008 2:12:18 PM GMT+05:30

File Edit Sort Formulas Revisions

C12 = GoogleLookup("India", "capital")

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
5	March 4, 2008	Receipt	19000					
6	March 5, 2008	Receipt	2400					
7	March 6, 2008	Receipt	1500					
8	March 7, 2008	Expense	10000					
9		Weekly balance	21350					
10								
11								
12			New Delhi 28°34'N 77°12'E	source: <a href="http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India">http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/India</a>				

Use the power of the Internet to ease your spreadsheet research with GoogleLookup

Web for data fields. This is as good as your spreadsheet doing research for you. An example: `=GoogleLookup("India"; "internet users")` will populate the cell with that figure.

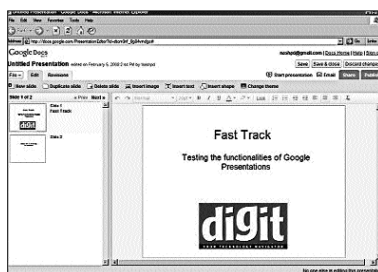
However, many similar attempts initially proved futile. The closest result we got was for `=GoogleLookup("India"; "capital")` which yielded the value New Delhi 28°34 N 77°12 E. The source for this data is highlighted. In this case it is mentioned as Wikipedia.

### 1.1.3 Google Presentations

With the markets and finances booming across all domains, it's all about presentations! The worst part of it all is the most crucial things are generally required in the shortest of notice. Tools such as these help in securing a redundant copy of that crucial document, spreadsheet or for that matter even presentations.

The next tool from the stable of Google Docs is Google Presentation. Similar to the way we used Document and Spreadsheet, create a new Presentation page by clicking on New > Presentation. You will see a blank page, similar to the start page of MS PowerPoint. You can add a title and sub-heading as you did in Google Documents. Similarly, adding an image is all the more simple. A simple slide is shown in the screenshot below.

You can add subsequent slides by clicking on the “New slide” button. Once you’re done with preparing the presentation, click on Save. For the convenience of users, Google has retained the shortcuts to work for essential functions such as Save ([Ctrl] + [S]). After saving your presentation, you can view them by clicking on “Start Presentation”. A new window will pop up and you will be able to view the presentation that you have just created.



On the move presentations were never this easy to create

The next site that we present is Zoho.com. Similar to Google, Zoho also provides an effective alternative to MS Office. In fact, Zoho provides more than a dozen of associated services—all assorted with and without cream!

## 1.2 Zoho

The guys at Zoho have done remarkably well in creating an online alternative for MS Office. In fact, in terms of usability, it's just as good as MS Office installed on a computer. During trials, Zoho responded faster than Google. Again, there is the one-time requirement to register yourself to use all the services. All you need to do is provide a user name and password, and off you go with the Office suite minus the cost and installation hassles.

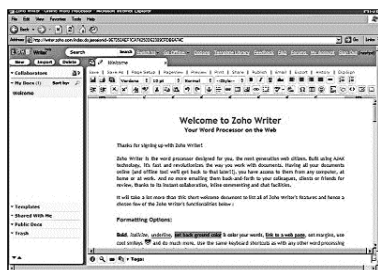
Why Zoho? Because it's all about functionality. Zoho offers you 14 different services, including Project Management software, Web conferencing, CRM, Database and reporting, an Online organiser as well as a chat facility to hold your group discussion sessions! Among the best is Zoho Creator which is similar to Access. And its all drag and drop, yet fully programmable.

### 1.2.1 Zoho Writer

This online word processor from Zoho is a great piece of design. The best part about this tool is that it has the least number of

drop-down menus. In fact, apart from the Font, Font size, and style of the intended text, all other functions are directly accessible as buttons. Now you no longer need to wonder under which drop down menu that last function you used was—it's all right there. You can also save templates like you save any conventional document.

The most evident feature of Zoho Writer is its usability. With an Internet connection having reasonable bandwidth, Zoho can actually feel better than Google. Say we want to prepare a sample resume—something that has text with a different font size and, say, a table dropped in. Let's keep this simple, just to see the performance and response of Zoho Writer. Once you login to the site, you would see a



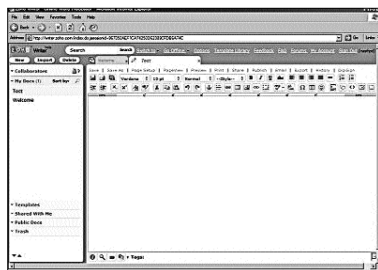
The sample page gives you a feel of how to go about creating your document



The function you see is the function you get!

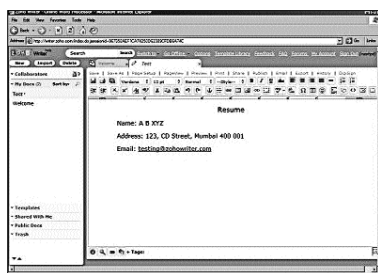
sample document. This would read Welcome to Zoho Writer, with all functions displayed. You can either continue by clearing it or simply creating a new document. To do this, click on the button on the top left of the screen which says new. You will now see a new page opening up as a fresh tab. By default this is named Untitled. You can rename this by just clicking on it and typing the new name. It's that simple!

Now the first step in writing the resume would involve the heading. In this case we want the word Resume in the centre of the page with a big-



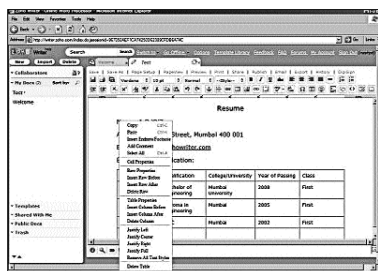
So we start with a blank document named "Test"

ger font size than the remaining text. Let us start with a heading having a font size of 14. The text that follows is typed with a smaller font size, in this case 12 being more appropriate. The following snapshot precisely highlights what we get.



Entering text is really easy

It has all been really smooth and easy as a user to come this far. Let's see how the table responds. The best part of the document, where we want to insert a table to indicate the educational qualifications. Inserting one in MS Office is troublesome at times, at least for novices. We have all been there once in our lives. Zoho Writer has really made it easy. All you need to do is click on the Insert Table button, select the appropriate matrix, which specifies the number of rows and columns for your table.



Inserting the table and trimming it is also so convenient

Once you are done with writing the text, the next step is saving the document. It also gives you an option to export the file in seven file formats, namely, Word, SXW, PDF, ODT, RTF, TXT and HTML. Before doing that however, don't forget that Zoho Writer is among the very few online office suites to offer a spell check service.

Once you are done with the document, you can simply hit the Save button and sign out. It's as easy as that. Keep experimenting and explore for yourself the rich treasure of functionalities embedded into this cool tool.

### 1.2.2 Zoho Sheet

The next tool on the board is Zoho Sheet. You can start this tool by using the "Switch To" from the toolbar of any of the Zoho service



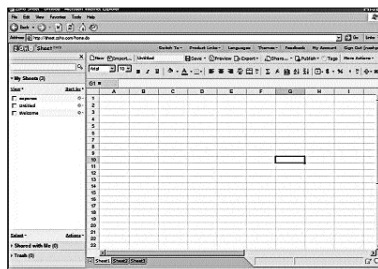


Now convert your files into a wide range of formats!

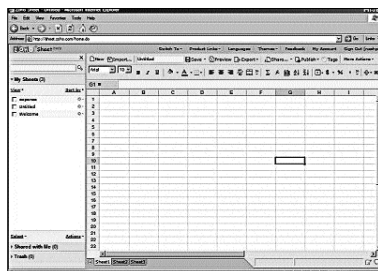
you are already using or simply go to <http://sheet.zoho.com>.

Those comfortable working with MS Excel will feel at home with Zoho Sheet. There are two possible themes available—Coriander Green and Metallic Grey, which could be changed at ease depending on your taste. Zoho Sheets can be accessed in 16 international languages in addition to English. Currently, none of the Indian languages are supported, but it gives you the option to request your language, so that they could start working on it. Besides, you could contribute as a translator yourself. The sheet in the screenshot shows a sample spreadsheet prepared using Zoho Sheet. It had good response time for each cell entered. It didn't give a feel that it was an online tool—in fact, it felt as good as MS Excel installed on the system.

An interesting function provided by Zoho is the chat function. Once you share your sheet with others in your chosen group, just click on the chat button to the bottom right of the screen, and real time discussions are possible among the group. Next to the chat button is the Comments button—use it to submit offline comments for others to see.



Zoho Sheet resembles MS Excel in so many ways!



Online spreadsheets have been simplified by Zoho Sheet

Zoho Sheets provides full compatibility with MS Excel, Open Document Spreadsheet, OpenOffice Calc as well comma separated values. Data can be imported from and exported to any of these formats.

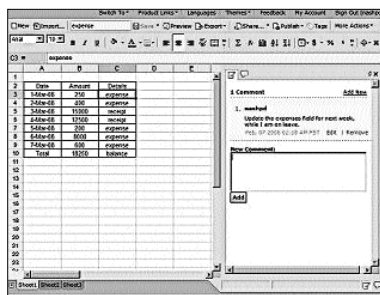
It's March, and how can one forget the tax woes! A click on the Product Link button yields files that have been by other users of Zoho sheet. Among the most interesting ones that you would find are Income Tax calculators and other similar sheets. These sheets are handy at this time of the year.

Another interesting function provided by Zoho is the ability to embed a spreadsheet on a Web site or a blog. Clicking the Publish button and then on Embed in Website / Blog yields a URL for public viewing, and also generates an HTML snippet, which can be pasted into the code of your blog.

Zoho Sheets comes complete with graphs as well, and this tool works as well as any commercial spreadsheet. Now be it your Pareto charts for QCs or analysis of past performance, Zoho Sheets will do it all for you!

### 1.2.3 Zoho Show

Zoho Show is an alternative to Microsoft PowerPoint and Open Office Impress. Whether you are a businessman, a salesman, a student, a teacher, a professional or anyone who is in need of making a quick and neat presentation, this tool will surely be of immense help to you. There is a uniform limit on file sizes in Zoho, and Zoho Show is no different. Files need to be under 10 MB in size for uploading to their server. You can even import presentations in either of the Microsoft formats (.ppt and .pps) or OpenOffice formats (.odp and .sxi). Overall, 10 MB seems to be reasonable for conventional presentations, unless of course you have rather large, high-resolution images embedded in your presentation.



Tell your buddies and associates what to do in your absence

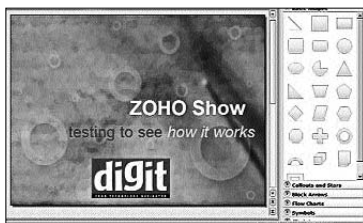
Once you log in to the Zoho Show interface, you can start off by clicking on New > Presentation. You would be given an option of themes with six categories to choose from.

Once you select the template that best suits you, you will be presented with a slide having the background as you chose. You may click on the Title and replace it with an appropriate one. Similarly, click on the sub-heading and replace it accordingly.

Now, with the basic presentation taking shape, let us also add an image. All you need to do is right click on the slide and you are given an option. Select “Add image”.

Even positioning the image is easy in Zoho Show. All you got to do is drag it to the appropriate location and then with the sliders at the edge of the image, rotate it as per your requirements.

Finally, you save the slide show. After that, depending on what you choose to do, you can either save it locally, or export it in a wide range of formats for use by your associates!



To insert images all you got to do is right-click!

## 1.3 ThinkFree

The ThinkFree website officially says “Free online alternative to Microsoft Office, Free 1 GB online storage, Free online document collaboration, Free document viewer, Free Documents”. They go on to add that Thinkfree would open Web pages containing spreadsheets, documents or presentations for you, in pretty much the same way that MS Office has been doing for so long. To top it all, Thinkfree gives you 1 GB of free storage space. Another added advantage is the Thinkfree Docs, which are documents uploaded by other ThinkFree Online users. This adds the additional power of social networking. Individuals just like you who share similar interests have uploaded their documents which can be really useful in gathering information for that last minute project report or topics, which may not be as visible online. This significantly boosts knowl-

edge sharing. ThinkFree also allows importing images from Flickr. If you use Facebook, you can add “ThinkFree Docs” to your apps list, and upload, publish and share your documents with your friends. Without much effort, you can find documents or even PowerPoint (or rather ThinkFree Show) presentations on topics like Using Ajax Libraries and Tools, Database objects, and other subject areas from varying realms of technology. Documents here are even rated in the genre of being most popular, highest rated and featured docs. On further searching here, you will find subject areas as diverse as stress management, animation, stocks and investment, baby care and even hobbies. It is easy to get lost in the ocean of resources on this site. The site’s recommendations say that you should have JRE 5.0 or later on your system for comfort while using the service; you can find the latest JRE on our CD every month. All ThinkFree services come with two options—Quick edit and Power edit. While you can Quick edit without any specific requirements, it is only for the Power edit that you need the Runtime environment.

So what should we expect from the ThinkFree stable? They have possibly given all that you can think of. The amount of free available resources is indeed outstanding. As far as performance of the whole suite goes, ThinkFree undoubtedly stands out. Among all the suites mentioned so far, nothing beats ThinkFree on compatibility with MS Office. As per the site, they have entered a new agreement with the largest Australian ISP—BigPond (from the house of Telstra)—to power a set of Web-based productivity tools. The tools will be available to the public as BigPond Office, now available at [www.bigpondoffice.com.au](http://www.bigpondoffice.com.au). The BigPond testers have done rigorous testing on the ThinkFree Office suite before giving their go ahead. Need we say more about ThinkFree?

Considering all the praise that it gets, let take a closer look at it. Among all the online office suites, it would really be difficult to rate them, more so against an offline conventional office suite such as MS Office. The criteria are diverse; needs and tastes vary.

The latest buzz is that Google is in talks with ThinkFree for a possible acquisition. This is surely a much-sought-after story, and with so much of media hype around ThinkFree, it’s going to stay on our radar for quite a while.

### 1.3.1 ThinkFree Write

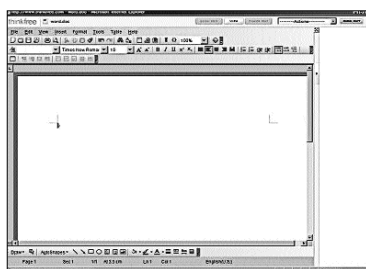
This is the word processor tool by ThinkFree.

The two buttons that you see towards the right of the screenshot decide the details of the tools you need. If you just need to do basic stuff, with little or no formatting, then you definitely do not need finer tools like comments, highlights, and so on. This helps in improving the response time of the tool by not loading unnecessary features for you. You get what you precisely need on priority. We opted for the Power edit to get a feel of what ThinkFree looks and feels like at its best.

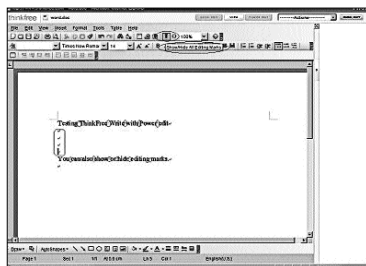
You will surely not be let down. It rightfully stands to all the hype and meets our expectations. For a moment, you might actually forget this is not MS Word! Even clicking on the side grid gets you a Page setup menu as a pop up just like Word. As you can see in the screenshot, you can show or hide editing marks—these include spacing, tabs and other formatting details that were used in the document.

ThinkFree Write does not miss out on styles and formatting either. Once again, it resembles MS Word. You could select the same style that you did while using Word. It is these small details that matter and capture your attention while working on ThinkFree. The biggies like Google also fail to give such a feel. Inserting images and objects into the document is also quite easy.

ThinkFree Write also comes with an AutoCorrect option similar to MS Word. For those who have not used AutoCorrect, it is an option whereby you can set the word processor to replace cer-



Feels just like MS Word



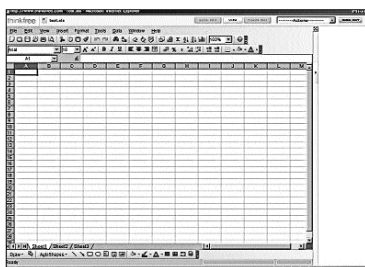
Even the smallest functions of MS Word have been retained

tain sequential text with a specific data field. For example (tm) can be set to be replaced with <sup>TM</sup>. Also, most common spelling errors could be stored and the word processor would correct it for you. Now you no longer have to wonder whether the word is spelt “recieve” or “receive”!

### 1.3.2 ThinkFree Calc

With ThinkFree Write raising the bar, obviously Calc, the spreadsheet, is not going to let you down.

ThinkFree Calc is loaded with nearly all the visible functionalities of MS Excel. This is evident from the very first use. Even functions such as the complex lookups are just clicks away. A pop-up window explains what relevant data fields need to be entered. A novice at using complex Excel formulae would vouch for the importance of this pop-up win-



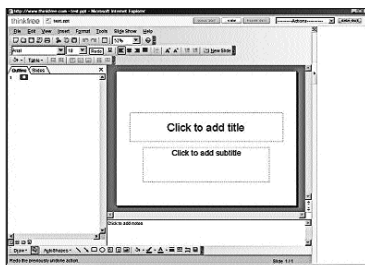
The spreadsheet from Thinkfree is no less functional than MS Excel—at least not in conventional usage

dow. It tells you whether the data field you need to enter is a cell value or a number or a character value. The developers at ThinkFree certainly have left it due to significant importance.

### 1.3.3 ThinkFree Show

ThinkFree Show also lives up to its expectations. Once again, the appearance is almost identical to MS PowerPoint.

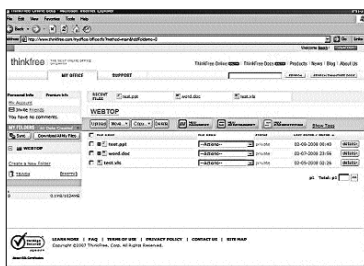
As is generally the case, browser-dependent applications depend heavily on the Internet. Hence, the Internet connection plays a vital role in the experience you will have while using these services. In case your Internet connection is a bit



Online, yet as smooth as MS PowerPoint

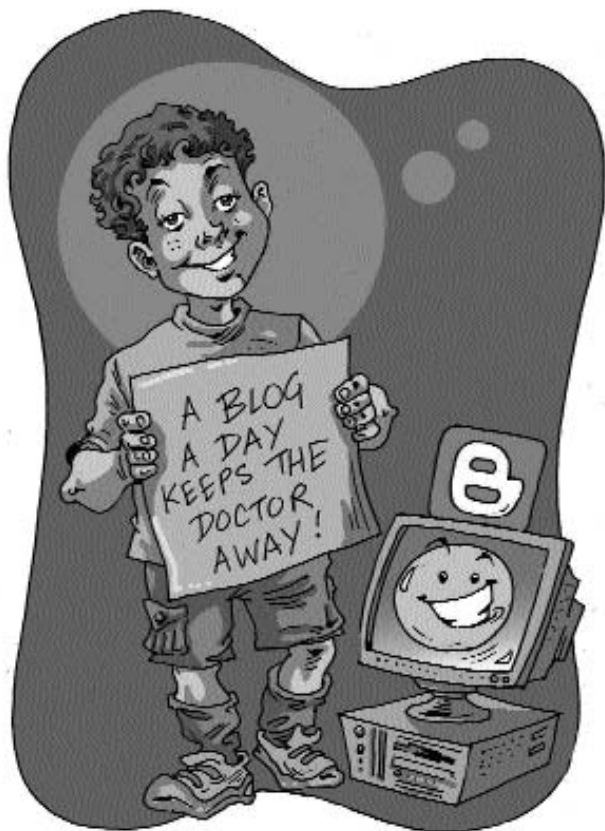
slower due to last mile connectivity issues, or ISP server hassles, it is recommended to use the Quick Edit function. For example, if you have a presentation in which you have to amend a few words, you wouldn't need the whole range of PowerPoint functions in it. In similar situations, it would be wise to select the Quick Edit function. However, in cases of detailed creativity, the best option is the Power Edit. The JVM only takes a while to initialise the first time, and from then on it's smooth sailing.

With all the test documents that we have prepared during the course of this article, going back to the inbox of ThinkFree summarises it all. From the interface, you could share, publish and even synchronise changes with offline documents.



**Monitor and edit all your docs, sheets and presentation from one interface**

# Blogging



**B**logging doesn't really need any introduction, but since we always introduce the subject of our article, let us get this essential job out of the way.

*A portmanteau of Web and log-blogs are simply personalised Web sites that are as good as an online diary.*

That was the intended definition. These days, however, collaborative blogs by corporate teams have sprouted all over the Internet.



Since the content in a blog is determined by the user, there can be blogs on practically any subject under the sun. Blogs are a great way of expressing opinions unhindered by the fear of censorship or unwillingness of publishers. It's free... it's fast... and it's easily accessible! All you need is an account with any of the myriad blogging services which are generally available for free. Customise your blog with templates, widgets, write content and create a community of readers. You can also upload pictures and video. Blogs are a great source of news and have been used effectively by political activists, writers, professionals and the like to get their message across. To know what the world is talking about, you need to be familiar with blogs.

A new fad these days is micro-blogging. This is really catching on as people find that they don't have all day at hand to write those long insightful pieces. Such services allow you to write sentences with not more than 200 words, while answering a standard question like "What are you doing?". If you have used the status feature in Facebook, then you probably know what we are talking about. Here, is a rundown of the most common and popular blogging tools you will ever need.

## 2.1 Blogging

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### 2.1.1 Blogger ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com))

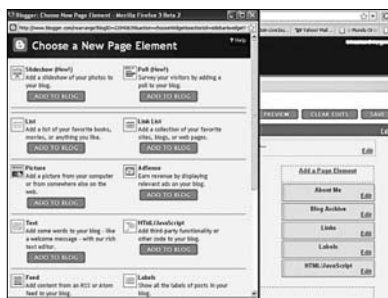
Blogger, is one of the most widely known blog hosting Web sites. It used to be an independent site before being taken over by Google. Therefore, you can use your Google account to create a blog—in a few minutes, complete with all the bells and whistles and the eye candy! Here is how you go about doing that.

Navigate to [www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) and sign in using your Google username and password. You will have to choose a name for your blog. When it comes to hosting, Blogger offers two options—either you can host the blog on the Blogger server, or on a dedicated server. The latter option becomes viable if your blog has garnered plenty of hits and is very popular. Blogs can be posted via FTP or SFTP (Secure FTP). Before doing that, however, you need to set up your blog.

Blogger has been out of beta since the beginning of last year, and there have been plenty of additions in terms of features. We have already seen how the new drag and drop interface works when you need to customise the blog and add newer features, but there is no harm in going over it again. For further details, please refer to our *Fast Track* dedicated to blogging in the February 2007 issue. Before this feature was launched, blogs had to be customised by going through the source code and modifying the HTML. This definitely doesn't appeal to the average user, especially those without technical know-how. However, their new interface enables users to modify the look of their blog by simple mouse actions.

The various page elements that you can add to your blog include slideshows of photos, links, RSS feeds, video, HTML/JavaScript, polls and labels. Select as per your need, and continue refining your blog. You could also choose from among the many templates offered in the Blogger setup. Just go to Template > New Template and choose your pick. In case you don't like the default templates, there are plenty of sites offering free Blogger templates. Some of these Web sites are [www.bloggertemplates.org](http://www.bloggertemplates.org), [http://www.finalsense.com/services/blog\\_templates/](http://www.finalsense.com/services/blog_templates/) and <http://www.pyzam.com/bloggertemplates> for high quality templates.

As mentioned earlier, we have covered all the basic features of Blogger in our *Fast Track to Blogging* in February 2007. Here, we would focus on the more recent features. Blogs can be posted in several newer languages including Hindi. There are absolutely no keyboard mappings to learn—you just have to type the equivalent phonetic script in English. We have tested the feature and while some of the more complicated words are not displayed in very accurate way, on the whole, this feature is pretty much intuitive.



The drag and drop interface for customising the look of your blog

The Arabic and Persian script is also supported, with the alignment and flow of template elements looking like a mirror image of the normal ones where the direction of flow of language is from left to right. Besides this, a nif keeps running in the b your post.



## Posting in Hindi

Another new feature that has been incorporated is the seamless integration between Youtube and Blogger and video uploading features. Videos can be uploaded locally simply with a mouse click. You could also share all your YouTube videos on your blog. As previously mentioned, photos from different photo sharing services like Flickr, Picassa and Photobucket can be displayed simply by using their feed. All your Blogger photos can be viewed in Picassa as well, with each post having its own album. You can also post via e-mail, or enable the settings such that whenever there is a new comment in response to yours in a blog post that would be mailed to you. Blogger is compatible with OpenID, therefore users can even comment on your posts using their OpenIDs instead of Google IDs. OpenIDs work on other blogging services such as Wordpress and Typepad as well, so users can utilise a customised ID for different services instead of signing up for multiple accounts.

Another neat feature that has been introduced is the use of custom domains. Blogger will host your site and the best part is that it won't end with the usual **.blogspot.com** for free. However, you still have to buy the domain either from registrars or from Blogger. Any posts that you make will be automatically redirected to the new domain. For this, just go to Settings > Publishing tab in your Blogger to configure some simple options. The older BlogSpot address will be automatically forwarded to the new address.

### 2.1.2 WordPress ([www.wordpress.org](http://www.wordpress.org))

WordPress is a open source blog publishing system that can also be used to host blogs. It is free to use and is very suitable for someone who wants to host blogs in his/her domain. In case you don't have a domain, you can sign up for your very own Wordpress blog.

A screenshot of the WordPress.com sign-up page. The page has a dark header with the WordPress logo and navigation links like 'Sign Up', 'Features', 'Support', 'Blog', and 'Advanced'. The main heading is 'Get your own WordPress.com account in seconds'. Below this, it says 'Fill out this one-step form and you'll be blogging seconds later!'. The form includes fields for 'Username' (with a note: 'Must be at least 4 characters, letters and numbers only'), 'Password', and 'Confirm'. Below these is a note: 'Our users and email uses characters, numbers and symbols like "/>" to be user friendly. Example: "user@domain.com"'. Then there is an 'Email Address' field with a note: 'We send important subscription notices to this address to help check it.'. At the bottom, there is a 'Legal Release' section with two radio buttons: 'I have read and agree to the following terms of service' (selected) and 'I am a blog' (like username.wordpress.com) and 'I am a username, please.'.

#### Sign up for WordPress

After reading our review of Blogger, you might be tempted the rather obvious question—"what makes this different"? or rather, "why should I use it"? The answer to these questions is control. Blogger is Google property, and just think what would happen if your Google account gets hacked? You would be shut out of everything: mail, calendar, reader. And if you have a blog with a flourishing readership, that goes too! Even though such a catastrophe does not occur, there is always the chance that you will not find enough configuration options or tweakability to make your blog stand out from the crowd. These are some of the reasons for using Wordpress. Another great reason is that with just the click of a mouse, you can import and export blogs from Wordpress. Did we mention plug-ins?

Wordpress blogs are the ultimate in tweaking. With enough time on your hands and by being a tech-savvy, you can make your blog look as good as a professionally designed site. Wordpress blogs have plugins—downloadable widgets that can be used to extend the usability and features of a barebones blog. Get the full list of plug ins from <http://www.wordpress.org/extend/plugins>. Some of the most popular downloadable ones are those that manage activities such as commenting, posting and statistics. Most of these plug-ins are free and developed by third-party developers.

Signing up is free and fast—select a name for your blog, username and password and you are all set to blog.

After signing up, choose your template and widgets that would add more zing to your blog. Wordpress comes with about

50 default themes, while there are tons of free and gorgeous themes available on the Internet at <http://themes.wordpress.net/page/1/>, [www.wpthemesfree.com](http://www.wpthemesfree.com) and [www.wpthemespot.com](http://www.wpthemespot.com). In fact themes used in Wordpress can also be used on other blogging services such as Blogger.

The Wordpress dashboard provides a host of features for writing, organising and publishing your blog. Apart from the standard online text editor, there are options for categorising your posts, bookmarking and tagging them and also setting the privacy options which could keep the blog visible to either all or just limit them to private. You could also decide



Themes for Wordpress

on who gets to post comments. An interesting feature of the Wordpress blog is the integrated stat tool which is as good as a specialised third party tool such as Statcounter (Dashboard > Blog Stats). A spam blocker called Akismet, available as a plugin handles spam in the comments section by looking for certain keywords and sentence patterns. All your favourite blogs can be managed and also arranged in categories via Blogroll (Blogroll > Categories).

A new feature that has been implemented in Wordpress is integration with OpenID. You are automatically assigned an OpenID, depending on the name of the blog. This URL, can be used to log in to other sites that supports OpenID where you can comment. This virtually covers all the other blogging platforms. The storage space on Wordpress has been jacked up to an awesome 3 GB, which means that you can upload even more word documents, spreadsheets, presentations and pictures. In case you want more space for your data, you have to opt for the premium membership by paying in two denominations \$50 per year for 15 GB and \$90 per year for 25 GB.

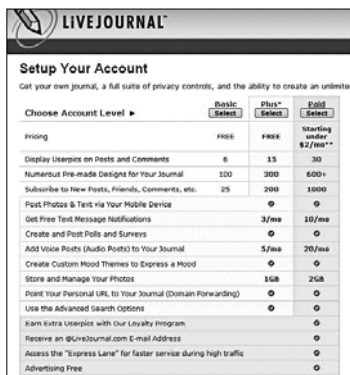
### 2.1.3 Live Journal

Live Journal is a blogging platform that lays strong emphasis on social networking and community. Its basic features are available in the free version and should be quite sufficient for the vast majority of bloggers. However, those with specialised needs could choose the paid account which starts at \$2 per month. There are two types of free accounts: Basic and Plus.

LiveJournal blogs look a little bit like the profile page of a typical social networking site. Invite friends, create and join communities on subjects that you are passionate about. Enter details like name, birthday and education. You can use up to 15 pictures for your profile. Finding communities is easy—go to <http://www.livejournal.com/community/search.bml> and enter the search parameters to find out communities. Likewise, friends can be arranged under different categories like family, local friends, online friends, school and work. You can add or delete categories, as well as reshuffle people between categories.

The scrapbook is the one stop shop when it comes to managing your pictures. Upload pictures, choose or create gallery styles, manage photos and tag them. It is modelled on the photo management applications of other social sites and the similarities are quite evident. There is a Wizard for Windows which can be run to upload pictures directly from Explorer.

Nevertheless, LiveJournal scores in the myriad posting options. Apart from the plain vanilla WWYSIWYG text editor, you can download a client from <http://www.livejournal.com/download/> so that you type your post even while you are disconnected. These posts then get uploaded as soon as you get hooked onto the Internet, similar to the Send/Receive function in Outlook! These clients can run on different operating systems, browsers, cell phones and



Choose Account Level ▶	Basic Select	Plus* Select	Paid Select
Inviting	FREE	FREE	Starting under \$2/mo**
Display Userpic on Posts and Comments	6	15	30
Numerous Pre-made Designs for Your Journal	100	300	600+
Subscribe to New Posts, Friends, Comments, etc.	25	200	1000
Post Photos & Text via Your Mobile Device	⊖	⊖	⊖
Get Free Text Message Notifications	⊖	3/mo	10/mo
Create and Post Polls and Surveys	⊖	⊖	⊖
Add Voice Posts (Audio Posts) to Your Journal	⊖	5/mo	20/mo
Create Custom Mood Themes to Express a Mood	⊖	⊖	⊖
Store and Manage Your Photos	⊖	1GB	2GB
Point Your Personal URL to Your Journal (Domain Forwarding)	⊖	⊖	⊖
Use the Advanced Search Options	⊖	⊖	⊖
Join Extra Userpics with our Loyalty Program	⊖	⊖	⊖
Receive an @LiveJournal.com e-mail Address	⊖	⊖	⊖
Access the "Express Lane" for faster service during high traffic	⊖	⊖	⊖
Advertising Free	⊖	⊖	⊖

Comparison between different versions of LiveJournal

PDAs. There are clients for Blogger too. Regarding the methods for posting, you can also voice-post or blog from your mobile phone on LiveJournal (limited to a specific number every month). There is a newly launched feature called LJ talk, an IM which uses the Jabber protocol. After adding username @livejournal.com to your friend list you can post from the IM clients supporting the Jabber protocol. If you choose mobile posting, you can perform all your tasks from a cell phone. Members with paid, permanent and Plus accounts can set up messaging from the Web, where friends can send messages to your phone via LJ. You can learn more about using LJ via mobile phone from <http://www.livejournal.com/manage/mobile.bml>



Settings for LJ talk

## 2.2 Micro-blogging

### 2.2.1 Twitter

Twitter is a micro blogging service that has been around for quite some time. Updates on Twitter, also called tweets are an answer to the question “What are you doing?”. The word count for the posts are limited to 140 words. However, in a day, you can upload as many times as you want. There are no ads, and the service is free.

What makes Twitter and such micro-blogging tools cool is the incorporation of social networking features. You can configure Twitter to follow the updates of your friends as they follow your own updates. Not only friends, but you can follow the updates of virtually anybody as long as you know their e-mail ID and they don't block you. Consider the applications of this feature—in a corporate environment, where several people are working as a team—such updates let all the team members know what is being done by whom. Parents worried about their children staying out late could take comfort from the “Stuck in traffic” status.

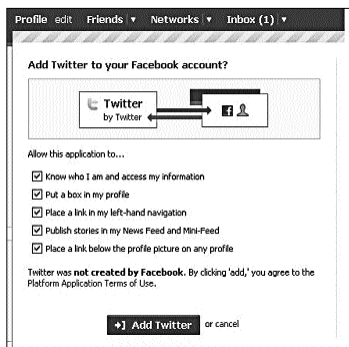
Now that you know how Twitter can be used, here's how to set it up. Go to [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com) and sign up. You will receive a unique URL—<http://www.twitter/username/>. Log in using your username and password and search e-mail services like Gmail, Yahoo!, MSN and AOL for your contacts. All those who are twitter members will show up in the list and you will be able to add them to your follow list. There is an option to invite other people by using their e-mail addresses. Once you have found the people who you like to follow and have added them, sit back and follow their updates. Privacy options include the feature to block a particular person from following your updates and to keep your posts out of public viewing. You can send private messages to others on your list by clicking on their names. Similarly, you can also get private messages from others.

Twitter can be tied in with IM and SMS facilities to provide great functionality. Go to Settings > Phone & IM and enter your IM screen name and phone number. In both cases you will be given a confirmation code. After following the instructions given, you can keep an eye out for updates from people on your list. In case of phones, you need to verify your number by messaging the code to a specified number. Once that is done, you can post and receive tweets via your mobile.

One of Twitter's greatest advantages is the proliferation of Twitter widgets. These widgets increase the available functionality, making it more user-friendly and following updates a lot less complicated. For an exhaustive list of such applications go to <http://twitter.com/downloads> and check out the wide variety of downloadable Twitter widgets made by third party developers.



Configuring Twitter for IM and phone



The Facebook application for Twitter



You can choose from downloadable widgets for computers and mobiles, Firefox extensions and Google gadgets. Most of these let you tweet without logging in to the Twitter home page. For twitter aficionados, also referred to as code jockeys, custom made Twitter widgets can be created by using the free Twitter API. If you love Twitter and Facebook, then there is an FB application for Twitter that brings the best of both together.

### 2.2.2 Pownce

Just launched out of private beta, Pownce is another microblogging tool that has been making waves for its easy functionality and feature-rich interface. Inspired by Twitter, it adds more functionality to the micro-blogging phenomenon and lets you do more than just announcing what you are feeling or doing! Get a feel of it at [www.pownce.com](http://www.pownce.com).

After signing up, log in to various social networks and e-mail services to find friends and contacts that are already there on Pownce. Some of these services are Digg, Facebook, Twitter, Gmail, Yahoo!, MSN, AOL and Flickr. You can do the usual job of sending out invites to friends.



Homepage of Pownce

The tagline of Pownce is “Send stuff to your friends”. Pownce lets you share messages, links, files and events with other people. Items can be shared publicly, privately or among groups. There are two versions—free and Pro. The free version lets you upload files of up to 10 MB and is ad-supported. The Pro version costs \$20 a year and lets you share up to 100 MB. A download, available from <http://pownce.com/download/> lets you do everything that can be done on the Web site. The software is cross platform and works on both Windows and Mac, with Linux support coming soon. However, to run this application you need to have Adobe Air installed on your system. The application has latency issues and it

has been reported that even on faster machines with broadband connection, the Ajax interface is painfully slow.

Pownce is not very different to Twitter. When trying to share files, sharing multiple files made the application go crazy. You have to zip the files and send the zipped archive as well. Like Twitter, Pownce also provides badges, a widget which can be put on any Web site to display your updates. Nothing new or notable here. Pownce looks like a me-too service and attempts to be a micro-blogging tool. A file sharing utility with a messaging service, it's literally the jack of all trades and master of none!



### Badges for your Web site

# Online Image Editors



**G**ood, free and basic image editing software are aplenty. Irfanview, a popular free image editor, offers good image editing options that are optimum for most users with vast libraries of personal photos. Basic image editing operations such as resizing, cropping and changing the hue and saturation are easily performed with software such as Irfanview. In such a scenario, the utility of Online Image Editors seems questionable, and we're going to provide the answers.

## 3.1 The Contenders

### 3.1.1 Prerequisites

Most sites use Flash or JavaScript to power their interfaces. So, in order to enable the services, the browser should be JavaScript-enabled with a Flash plugin installed. Those of you familiar with either JavaScript or Flash would fervently vouch for the importance of having a broadband Internet connection, since the interfaces can be really heavy. While not a prerequisite, having a fast connection considerably reduces the waiting time. Additionally, some of the effects available on these sites are quite computing-intensive, and having a powerful PC yields faster results.

### 3.1.2 Picnik.com



Editing pictures using the Picnik tab

This is a Flash-based site. A 1.5-MB flash file is first downloaded to your system prior to using the service. There are two versions of the service, with the paid premium version offering some additional effects. However, the free service is sufficient in most aspects for basic users. While one can register on the site, using the services does not require one to do so.

Picnik integrates with most online photo sharing sites like Flickr, Webshots and Photobucket. Images already uploaded to these sites can be directly edited in Picnik, after logging in into the site with the username and password of the respective image hosting site. Photos on your system can also be edited, after they have been uploaded. You can even load an image onto Picnik by providing the URL of an online image. A Picnik add-on for Firefox is also available, which adds an option in the context menu that makes it easier to import images to Picnik for editing.

The interface is relatively easy to use even for amateurs at image editing. A tool tip pops up every time a tool is selected, offering helpful instructions on usage. Most popular images formats such as JPG,



Picnik's exposure options

PNG and TIFF are supported. The interface is prompt and responsive, most of the time. The odd lag is noticeable only while dealing with the Effects controls.

The Edit tab has all the controls that can be used to modify the image. Here one can Crop, Resize, Rotate, Sharpen, and Control the Exposure and Hue of the image by using the simple tools that are presented. Some of the tools have an Auto mode where the recommended changes are automatically applied. Additional manual controls are also provided, and allow greater control over the process. The Red Eye tool can be used to treat the red eye effect seen in many photos.

The Create tab further bundles image editing tools. Under the Effects button, various effects can be applied to enhance the image. The effects include converting into Black and White and Sepia and also creating a "Soft focus" effect on the image. Although most of the effects listed here are not freely available, watching their results is quite interesting. The Soften effect deserves special mention since the results are truly impressive, rivalling the work of professional photographers. Each of the effects can also be manually tweaked by you to create even better looking pictures.

Text can be added to the image with the Text button. Here, a selection of formal and fun fonts is presented to be used for the text. Most of the fonts are reserved for premium users.

Under the Shapes button, different set symbols and shapes are presented which can be readily inserted into the image. Most of the symbols are available only for premium users. The shape, orienta-

tion and position of the shapes and text boxes can be changed by you. The Frame button allows the image border to be created or modified, making it easy to have a circular or oval border instead of the usual rectangular one.

Multiple effects can be applied to the same image, though while moving from one effect to the other without saving the results of the previous effect, Picnik alerts you to either save or discard the changes made. However, considering that there is no limit to the steps that can be undone with the undo button, you can experiment to your heart's content without having to worry about starting all over again.

The mouse wheel can be used to control the level of Zoom. This is a nifty feature and is available throughout the interface. The context menu can be accessed by right-clicking anywhere on the interface, and allows quicker access to the main menu options.

The final image can be saved on the PC, or directly sent to the same online image hosting sites like Flickr or Photobucket. The file formats supported are JPG, GIF, TIFF and PDF.

Fortunately, Picnik doesn't grey out the premium options which make it easier for you to discover the additional available features and also discern whether it is worth paying. There are some premium effects that are really interesting and worth experimenting with.

### 3.1.3 Pixenate.com

This is an AJAX-powered site. It is considerably quicker off the block than Picnik because the interface is lighter. But the flipside is that it features fewer tools and a higher amount of data transfer, causing delays with every action.

Pixenate only supports the JPG file format, and integrates only with Facebook allowing the editing of images uploaded to that site. Online images can be loaded for editing by providing the URL.

The site offers basic tools such as Crop, Resize and Rotate. The



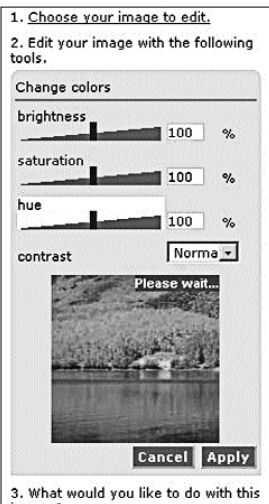
Picnik's shape  
options

Crop and Resize controls allow you to set the desired parameters, but the Rotate control can only rotate the image clockwise by 90 degrees with every click. For finer rotation, the Spirit Level tool needs to be used, which is a bit cryptic to figure out without reading the accompanying tool tip. Pixenate offers two controls—Enhance and Fill Light—to quickly modify the Contrast, Saturation and Brightness aspects of the image. You only need to click on the button to apply the effect. There are no modifiable options to control the amount of applied brightness or colour. You can, however, apply the effect as many times as the need arises. Finer grained modifications are possible from the Colours control, where the levels of brightness and contrast can be individually set. The Sepia control allows the picture to be coated in a Sepia tone, but also allows the application of other colours. The image can also be converted into Greyscale. The Red Eye and Whiten tools are used to touch up the images exhibiting artificial or natural defects.

Besides the basic tools, Pixenate also offers a few “fun” tools. The Text tool allows inserting text into an image. The orientation of the text box cannot be modified, and there are only limited options on where to place the box. Besides that, the font, colour and intensity can be modified. Speech bubbles can be included with four options to choose from. The font characteristics, however, cannot be modified. The Lomo control, Filter Control and Oil Paint control allow the addition of some cool effects to the image. Some of the controls



The Pixenate toolbox



Pixenate's colour options and preview box

include a preview box, which reduces the delay normally associated with applying the effect to the entire image.

The final image can be uploaded on Flickr or saved to your PC. There are no options representing the file type and compression levels used in this process.

Pixenate, while not in the same league as Picnik has its own advantages. The lighter interface loads faster and consumes less system resources, which makes it more attractive for those who don't have a fast Internet connection or computer. The tools, while comparatively fewer, include the most frequently used ones and deliver the desired results. If you bore easily, waiting after every step will cause you hairloss.

### 3.1.4 Snipshot.com

This is another lightweight, AJAX-driven service that manages to trim the waiting times witnessed in Pixenate.com, in spite of data transferred with each step. Unfortunately, its free version is even more featureless.

Snipshot allows images to be uploaded from your PC or any online source with a URL. The spartan interface has a toolbar on top with just the basic controls.

When the image is loaded, the Resize control is activated by default. There are no options available to you to enter a specific size, and instead the image handles need to be dragged till the desired dimensions are achieved. A tooltip that offers information about the image size while being resized is the only aid that you get. Similarly, the Crop control has to be manually operated to achieve the desired results. Even here, the tooltip is the only guide you get. The Rotate control rotates the



Snipshot's interface is light but featureless



image clockwise by 90 degrees with every click. The Enhance control automatically sets a recommended level of contrast and saturation for the image. The Adjust control can be used to manually adjust these levels. Here, the rotation angle can be set. Besides, the levels of exposure, contrast, saturation and hue can also be finely tweaked. The Effects control only allows converting the image to greyscale for free account holders. The other more interesting effects are reserved for premium customers. Unfortunately, the effects cannot be previewed, as in the case of Picnik.com.

Snipshot.com is ideal for someone who wants to perform some quick and basic maintenance operations on an image. Its lightweight AJAX interface, in addition to its effectiveness in cutting down on the waiting cycles as data is transferred between the browser and Web site, make it a worthy service. The lack of ease of use for first time users is a turn off.

### 3.1.5 Splashup.com

Earlier known as Fauxto (pronounced “Photo”, and still making an appearance in the File Menu of the interface), Splashup is a Flash-powered service. It is probably the most advanced of the services discussed here. With an interface resembling that of Adobe Photoshop, it can seem a bit intimidating for those who just want to crop an image. However, if you have spent some time on Photoshop, you will appreciate the ability of Splashup to work with Layers. Though Flash powered, it has a less bulky interface as compared to Picnik, contributing to faster loading times.

Splashup is compatible with many online image hosts such as



Xplashup's photoshopesque interface

Flickr and Webshots and can work directly with images stored on these sites. It can also import images from the system or from any given URL. It can also use images captured from a Webcam, if one is connected to your PC.

Tools required for basic operations are found under the Image and Filters menu in the toolbox. Under the Image menu, the Image Size and Canvas Size options allow resizing of the image. The desired dimensions can be entered in the relevant boxes. Selecting the Constrain option ensures that the aspect ratio of the dimensions is maintained. The Autocrop tool automatically identifies and deletes blank areas in the image. To manually crop an image, the Crop tool from the toolbox needs to be selected. The area that needs to be cropped can be selected and the rest of the image automatically gets deleted. Since the crop tool doesn't present an opportunity to fine tune the crop area, the Marquee tool can be used with a similar effect. After creating the marquee, the Crop link in the Image menu can be used to delete the items outside the marquee. Selecting any tool in the Toolbox opens a menu bar below the main menu containing additional configurable options pertaining to the tool.

The Rotate Tool can be used to rotate the image. Clicking on the tool provides the centre of rotation of the image. This point can be repositioned by you. To rotate, drag the corners of the image to the desired angle. You can change the shape of the image with the Free Transform tool. After clicking on the tool, the borders of the image can be dragged in any direction to create the necessary effect. The rest of the tools in the Toolbox pertain to adding colour and shape to the image. The Text tool can be used to insert text into the image. Font style, size, and strength can be set from the tool menu.

Under the Filters menu, more powerful image editing controls can be accessed. Here, the image can be Sharpened and Blurred. These controls do not offer additional options. The Hue and Saturation as well as the Contrast and Brightness control can be



Splashup's main menu and text submenu

modified by using the related option. Some of the other fancy effects that can be added are pixellation, embossing, inverting, and preparing posters.

Layering is a powerful image manipulation method. Those of you who are not familiar with this aspect of image editing can consider a Layer as a transparent medium placed over an image. The effects are applied to the layers, and by controlling the visibility of the layer the impact of the effects on it can be controlled. Many layers can be created, each with a different effect making it easier to manage the editing process, since working with one layer does not affect the others.

In Splashup, the Layer box lists the different layers in the image. A layer can be selected by clicking on it, thereby making the effects that were created on the layer accessible for editing. Splashup offers a Layers menu that allows managing layers—adding, deleting, merging, positioning and rotating. Besides, a Layer Effect option that includes some more effects not available under the Filters menu is also available. The effects include the Drop Shadow, Bevel, Gradient and Glow effects. Each layer can contain more than one effect.

Since normal image formats such as .jpg do not save informa-



Splashup main menu and text submenu

tion about the layers, Splashup allows images edited on the site to be saved in a unique file format which retains the work-in-progress detail. The .fxo file format is capable of retaining information across sessions. So the next time you visit the site, the details about the layers and other aspects can be retrieved.

The final image can be saved directly to an online image hosting site, or saved to your disk.

Splashup, in spite of all the potential, has an Achilles' heel—the absence of a proper manual. Simple tasks can seem really daunting with the controls hidden under layers of menus. With all this, Splashup only manages to appear aloof to most lay users seeking a quick touch up of their photos. While those familiar with

Photoshop may feel comfortable with the interface, the rest of humanity will have a tough time performing even a simple operation such as Resizing an image.

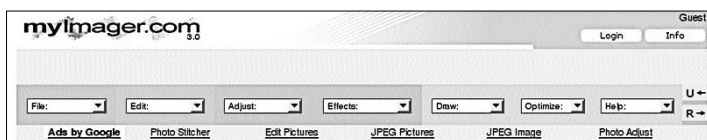
### 3.1.6 myImager.com

This is a normal HTML-based service, with minimal interaction. Each user selection has to be passed to the Web site, and the modified pages and images are refreshed in the browser. System resources are sparingly utilised by this service and so slow systems can also be used without any performance glitch. The lack of interaction means you will have to be more patient, with each selection of a tool requiring a page reload. The webpage is loaded with a few ads, besides the applicable 500 KB file size limit. However, these restrictions can be overcome by registering for the paid service.

The interface is simple, with a row of drop down boxes making up the toolbar as seen on other image editing sites. Myimager doesn't integrate with any other image hosting site, so either the file can be uploaded from your system or directly taken from a Web site, if the URL is provided. Myimager only supports the .jpg and .gif file formats.

Myimager can also be used to create an image, button or texture. The options to do so are available under the File Drop down menu. Selecting any of the mentioned options causes the page to refresh. This is the case with each menu choice made throughout the site. Myimager comes preloaded with a lot of interesting texture and button design choices that can be used as a base to build on or modify.

Once the image, texture, or button is loaded, the Edit menu offers basic options to resize, crop, rotate and flip the images. The F Switch option can be used to convert the .jpg file into .gif and vice-versa. With no interaction, you cannot use the pointer to define the areas to crop or the angle to rotate. This can be troublesome while



The myImager toolbar

trying to crop or rotate an image, requiring a lot of trial and error.

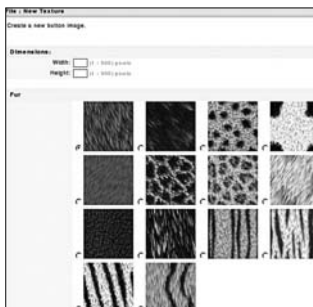
The Adjust toolbar can be used to change the colour aspects of the image such as the brightness, contrast, hue and saturation. Here, you are expected to enter numeric values for the desired levels. This also involves a lot of trial and error. The Adjust drop down also has a few other effects such as converting to Greyscale or black and white, normalising and colouring. Most of these controls have additional configurable options, while the others such as Equalise and Normalise are automatically applied.

Myimager probably supports the most fun effects among similar sites.

There are over a dozen special effects, besides the popular ones such as Sharpen and Blur. Selecting the text tool allows inserting Text into the image. The font styles and colours can be changed, along with the position of the text box. Since the position has to be specified as coordinates, some trial and error will be needed before arriving at the exact desired location.

Most effects cannot be configured and are applied to the image as a whole with the centre of the image used as the reference point. Effects such as Oil Paint, Charcoal and Pixellate can be applied with a single click, while some effects like Motion Blur, Wave and Solarize need additional control.

The Draw drop down box allows inserting shapes into the image. Only basic shapes such as Rectangles and Ellipses are supported, though they can be modified



Texture choices in myImager

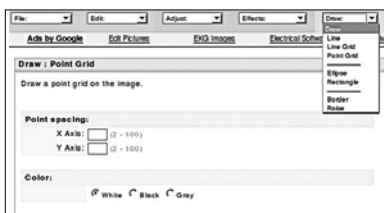


...and button choices



myimager has some cool effects

to create circles and squares as well. Besides, as an example of interaction, the location of the centre of the shape can be selected by using the mouse pointer. An image border with varying thickness and colour can also be applied here.



myImager's draw options

Before saving the image, the quality of the compression can be set by the Optimise drop down. The finished image can be saved by the Save option in the File drop down list.

Although Myimager offers an Undo button, in functionality it is as good as clicking on the browser's back button.

Myimager is noteworthy, thanks to the interesting effects on offer and the choice of pre-designed textures. Those of you who are seeking to create a unique background for their graphic or Web site will find a visit to this site worthwhile. Also, the lack of bare minimum interaction with the need to reload the page for each image several times to apply a single effect, significantly mar the user experience. In a way, the file size limitation is a boon in disguise.

### 3.1.7 Fotoflexer.com

This is arguably the best online image editor. It combines the ease of use of Picnik, the breadth of features of Splashup, and adds a lot more to offer a truly awe-inspiring example of the power of Flash. Superlatives will come naturally when interacting with Fotoflexer's elegant and simple, yet powerful interface.

Fotoflexer integrates with most popular image hosting sites and images stored in them can be directly accessed by signing into those accounts from Fotoflexer. Images can also be uploaded from your PC or can be loaded from a given URL. It supports .jpg, .gif and .png formats only, although it can save images only in the .jpg and .png formats.

The interface takes its own sweet time to load and seems almost similar in size to the one used in Picnik.com. But that is where the similarities end. The Fotoflexer interface is more intu-



The Fotoflexer toolbar

itive with everything properly organised in tabs. Clicking on a tab reveals additional buttons which are neatly labelled, making life easier for neophytes.

The work area on Fotoflexer is spacious and uncluttered and doesn't feel constrained and restricted as in Splashup. The Basic tab lists basic tools such as Rotate, Flip, Resize and Crop. A helpful addition is the ability to create a duplicate of the image to be modified rather than working on the original, making the Preview function redundant. The Autofix button can be used to automatically perform the recommended changes to the picture. While the Red eye tool can be used to remove those artefacts. The Rotate button rotates the image by 90 degrees in either direction at one go. For better control, you could use the rotate handles that appear when the image is selected. Clicking on any tool that requires user intervention will cause a message to appear on the toolbar explaining the appropriate steps to be taken.

Fotoflexer offers many options under the Effects tab that can be used to change the colour or contrast aspects of the image. Each of these controls is descriptively labelled making it easier to figure out what the expected results are. Besides the commonly seen effects such as Sepia, Greyscale and Pixellate, some of the novel effects are Nightvision, Fresco and Neon. Some of these effects take time to be applied and during this period the workspace gets blurred. All of these effects allow user configuration. Clicking on the button for a particular effect brings up the additional options.

The Advanced Options button available with most effects allows you to change the scope of the effect—either apply it to



The Fotoflexer effects tab

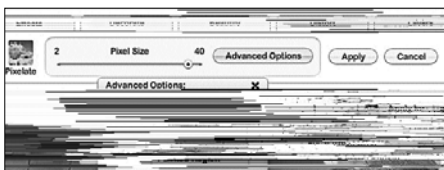
the entire image or just to a selected portion. It is easy for you to get lost in the plethora of options provided by Fotoflexer in this tab. And each tweak and turn is immediately reflected on the selected image making the whole process much fun.

The Decoration tab contains controls to spruce up the image with additional artwork. The Shapes button offers a wide range of pre-designed shapes

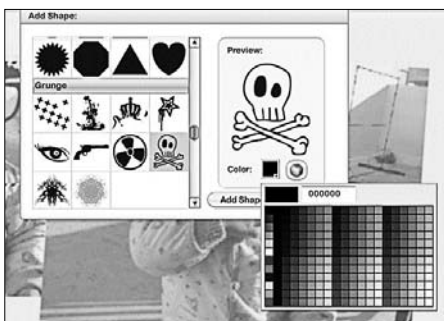
that can be included along with the image. Noticeably, some of the shapes that were reserved for premium users in Picnik are freely available here. The colour of the object can be modified before it is inserted in the image. Similarly, the position and orientation of the object can also be changed. In addition, text can also be entered with the Text button. The Font choices are truly mouth-watering!

The Draw tool can be used to create freehand drawings on the Image, similarly the Erase tool can be used to erase parts of the image, which are specifically useful when dealing with image layers—erasing one layer reveals the contents of the layer beneath it. The Fill tool can be used to add colour to an area with a different colour. Fotoflexer automatically selects the contiguous areas with the same colour and applies the Fill colour to those areas only. This frees you from having to manually mark those areas. The Colour picker tool can be used to choose a particular colour from the image to be used by other tools like Draw and Fill.

The Insert-A-Face and Greeting tools are truly path-breaking features. The Insert-A-Face tool automates the process of cutting the



Fotoflexer's additional advanced effects options

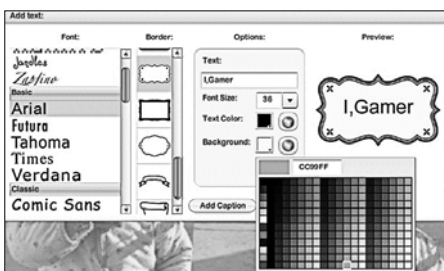


Fotoflexer's add shape options

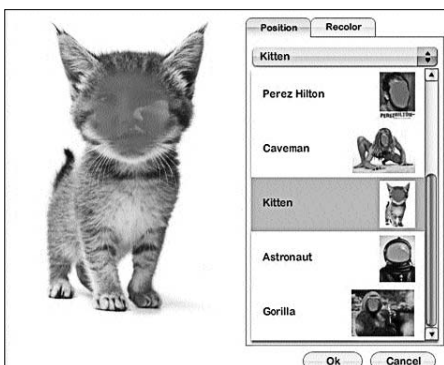


face from an image and applying it on to another. You only have to click on the “centre of the nose” of the face in an image. This pops up a list of possible areas where the face can be reapplied. The options include a kitten, a gorilla and few lesser-known primates. The size, orientation and colour aspects of the cut face can be modified. The ease with which the exercise is completed is breathtaking.

In terms of operation, the Greeting Card tool is similar to the Insert-A-Face tool except that it also allows insertion of text. The Border



Fotoflexer's text options

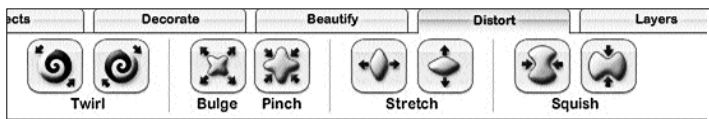


Fotoflexer's insert-a-face feature

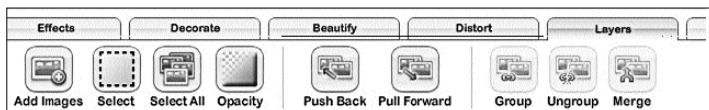
tool also offers much more than what has been seen so far, going beyond just allowing colour and thickness as options to the border. Here, one can also create fancy picture-frame like borders, adding a lot of appeal and character to the simple image.

Under the Beautify tab, tools to Smoothen and Sharpen the image are presented. Clicking on the button suitably modifies the image. Two additional controls are labelled as Fix Blemishes and Smoothen Wrinkles, but effectively they are just the Smoothen tool with a user configurable area of effect.

Under the Distort tab are another set of tools to manipulate images. These tools allow the image to be Twirled, Bulged, Pinched, Stretched and Squished, mostly producing hilarious results. These tools cannot be applied to the entire image and their scope and



The Fotoflexer distort tab



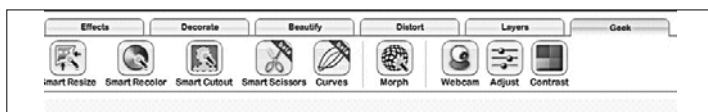
Fotoflexer's layer options

strength can be set by you.

The Layers tab allows you to manage different layers in the image. The term Layers is probably misleading-Fotoflexer considers a layer as an image, and vice versa. However, in the case of Splashup or Photoshop a layer can contain other items as well.

Under the Layers tab, additional images can be opened. To simultaneously work on more than one image, a Fotoflexer account is needed because only images uploaded to the Fotoflexer account are made available for addition as a layer. Here, the order of the layer can be changed and its opacity can be set. Layers can either be grouped and ungrouped, but merging two layers is a one-way street, as there is no Unmerge button.

The Geek Tab has some truly fascinating tools. The Smart Resize tool can be used to change the size of the image without resorting to the normal crop or resize tools. Using a method called Seam Carving, portions of an image can be deleted without changing its dimensions. This is done by spreading the existing bits of the image to cover the unwanted part. Since the existing image is being spread, the area to be deleted has to be suitably small to avoid distorting the image. Similarly the image can also be expanded to occupy a larger footprint-again, to avoid distortion it is best not to aim for a significant increase in percentage. Fotoflexer allows you to mark specific areas in the image that need to be covered up and those areas that should not be distorted to make the process more precise. The tool is best seen in action, since putting it in words may not do it justice.



Fotoflexer's Geek tab options

The Smart Recolor and Smart Cutout tools operate on similar lines—identify important and unimportant parts and let Fotoflexer do the rest. In case of the Smart Recolor tool, the areas marked unimportant are coloured over with the user-defined colour, while in the case of Smart Cutout, the areas marked unimportant are erased from the image.

Both these tools are computing-intensive and the time for completion will depend on the speed of your system.

Smart Scissors allows you to mark an outline of the area in the image that needs to be deleted. The selection can also be inverted to leave the marked area and erase the rest of the image. The Web cam tool can be used to capture images from a webcam connected to the system. Fotoflexer also allows different effects to be applied to the captured images (as mentioned in the blog and not tried out by us).

## Seam Carving

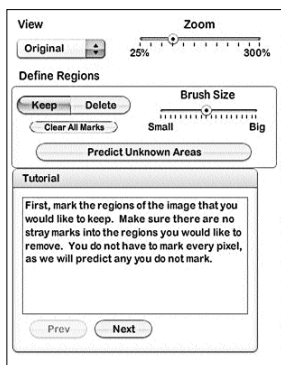
This is a relatively new invention in the graphics arena. The complete technology details and a Youtube video of the technology in action can be accessed at [seamcarving.com](http://seamcarving.com). Briefly, the technology involves adding or removing pixels in the unimportant parts of an image to increase or decrease its size. A Seam refers to that frontline where the image manipulation is taking place. The best place to see this process in action is at [Rsizr.com](http://Rsizr.com). Rsizr also allows other forms of image editing such as Cropping and resizing. However, the interesting effect is under the Retarget tab, selected by default. Any image can be uploaded to the site and the important and unimportant areas marked. The sliders to set the final vertical and horizontal dimensions are present on the respective axes. Setting the marker on this slide initiates the process. As the carving takes place, the seam is marked in red. Worth a thousand words. You can view other people's experiments with Seam Carving at <http://rsizr.com/about/gallery/>.

The Curves tool allows the image's colour characteristics to be tweaked by manipulating the individual constituent colour channels (Red, Green and Blue). Advanced users who can work with colour histograms will find this tool informative. The Contrast and Adjust tools allow tweaking individual parameters such as contrast, brightness, hue and saturation. The Morph tool remains an enigma. Not being a pro in the Animation arena, the reviewer had a tough time figuring out how to import "control lines", start image and final image. Throwing another spanner in the works was the lack of coverage of this tool in the brief demo that covered the other Geek tools. What can be stated authoritatively, though, is that it is a computing-intensive process. And Fotoflexer helpfully reports the expected time for completion. In our aborted attempts at morphing, the expected time for morphing between two images each measuring  $400 \times 300$  pixels was over 90 min.

Fotoflexer also implements a feature-laden context menu, which has most of the frequently used options. Rotating, Flipping and Deleting an image can be accomplished from right here. The Smart Cutout tool and Smart Recolor tool can be accessed directly as well.

The complete image can be saved in any of the several online webhosts that Fotoflexer integrates with or can be stored offline.

Undeniably, Fotoflexer is a great service.



**Fotoflexer's smart cutout options**

### 3.1.8 Picasize.com

This is an AJAX-powered Web site that offers the basic tools in a pleasant and interactive interface. It offers you the option to choose from two versions of the service, the non-AJAX powered older version 2 or the newer, version 3. The latter is better.

There is nothing to write home about the tools on offer. The usual Rotate, Resize, Crop and Contrast tools are all available. The

effects can be applied to the entire image or to just a selected area in the image—dragging the pointer over the image will cause a rectangular area to be selected. Text can be inserted, but the position is restricted to the top left of the image. Other creative tools like Oil paint and Spread are also available to manipulate the image. Some tools, like the Spread and Blur tools, allow additional user control over the results. The ability to keep more than one tool window open at the same time on the screen will find many admirers.

What makes Pic Resize stand out though, are the non-image manipulation tools. The Batch Resize tool which can be accessed by a link placed way down in the toolbar, allows you to upload several images to the site and set a final size as a percentage of the original size with only three options being available here—25%, 75% and 50%. The resized images are available for download as a single zipped file. Resized images are available only for 20 min for download on the server. The other feature worthy of mention is the Select Quality link that can be used to set the compression level for the file. The link pictorially presents the image amidst four different quality settings on offer, making it easier for you to appreciate the relation between file size and quality.



The pic resize toolbar

### 3.1.9 Lunapic.com

This is a simple HTML Web site that suffers from the usual lack of interaction with increased refresh cycles. But it stands out purely for offering the most numerous effects and tools on offer among online image editors.

Lunapic can handle image files such as .jpg, .gif, .png and .bmp in addition to video files such as AVI and RM. It can directly work with images stored on sites like Photobucket and Flickr, besides images available either online or offline.

The menu lists all the options available for you. Besides the menu bar, it also has a toolbox that contains the most frequently

used tools like Rotate and Crop. As already mentioned, being coded in HTML each menu selection is accompanied by a page refresh. In turn, you have to be patient enough as the refreshing can take time depending on the size of the image being modified.

The Edit menu offers the options to Crop and Resize the image. The Draw menu has options to insert Text into the image. The position of the text can be altered by dragging it. Other tools grouped in this menu are the Border tool, Fill/Paint bucket tool, Freehand drawing tool and the Speech Bubble tool. The Zit and Blemish remover is a smoothening tool in disguise. The Cosmetic Surgery tool allows selected areas in the image to be squeezed or expanded.

The Adjust menu groups some of the other familiar tools—Flip, Blur, Motion Blur, Contrast/Saturation control, Greyscale conversion, Sepia tone addition, and Red Eye Reduction. The need to continuously reload the image takes away from the fun of watching the results of these tools, but nonetheless they are still useful.

The Effects menu is what makes Lunapic worthy of mention. The long list of effects contains esoteric names like Andy Warhol Effect, Thermal Effect, Lightning effect, and Fire Effect. Some of the effects that have been previously experienced are Charcoal, Pencil Sketch and Emboss. Using most of these effects is a single click affair, with no user configurable options.

Lunapic also supports several animation effects. The old Java applet based Reflecting water effect still makes its presence felt in the list (though in this case it is a .gif file). To view sample animations, click on the More animations link.

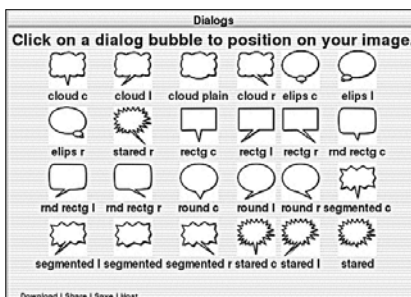
Completed files can be saved in a variety of formats such as .jpg and .png (without animation), and .gif and .swf (animation).

Lunapic is a very strange site to say the least. In spite of all the goodies, the site seems stuck in a time warp, as advances in Web site scripting apparently have given this site the slip. The use of antiquated HTML to power a site



Lunapic's toolbox and menu

that needs better interaction presents the biggest hurdle in thoroughly using the tools on the site. The repeated refreshes can be an annoying exercise. Additionally, the ads on the site do their bit to aggravate you. Hmmm! Now, what was the word that rhymes with “Lunapic”?



Lunapic's speech bubble options.

### 3.1.10 Picture2Life.com

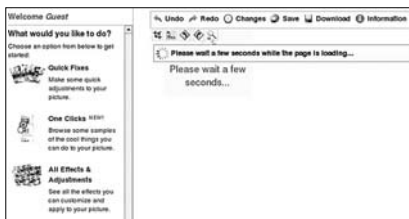
Picture2life is an AJAX-powered site. Unlike the other sites listed here, P2L doesn't present the toolbar or menu right off. Getting to the editing part requires some navigation and scrolling through the page to find the relevant link. And, though the interface has a lot going for it, it has the inclination to act up more frequently than can be considered polite. Most importantly, after uploading the image, before starting to edit, the page seems to get stuck. (this was true in our case, atleast). If this does occur, click around a few buttons-applying the “Featured Effect” seems to get the process back on track many times. Once the interface overcomes the initial teething troubles, it is a pleasure trip.

P2L integrates with the popular sites such as Facebook and Flickr and images can be imported from your accounts on these sites. Images stored online as well as offline can be imported.

P2L has a different approach to image editing. Rather than presenting a menu with buttons, it presents a brief description of the tool, along with a preview thumbnail of the image after the associated tool has been applied. This makes it easier for you to decide on the impact of the effect without having to apply the tool to the entire image. Besides this, P2L offers statistics about the tools that are popular among its users, and also keeps track of the tools frequently used by you, making it easier to access them the next time. The scroll wheel can be used as the Zoom tool when the pointer is positioned above the image. The basic tools—Resize, Rotate and Crop

are always available above the image.

The tools offered on the site are displayed on the left sidebar. The tool description and general information for you is available in this area. A thumbnail of the image contain-



P2L's everloading interface

ing the effect is displayed alongside the tool description. The language is friendly and makes even novices comfortable in spite of powerful effects and filters being utilised.

The Quick Fixes link presents all tools like Blur, Border, Hue and Saturation. Here, you can directly apply the effect to the image by clicking the Apply button. You can also further customise the effect by clicking on the Customise button. Doing so will open the options for the particular tool in the sidebar. Additional changes can be made, and the changes are reflected in the image. However, unless the Apply button is used, the changes are not saved. The Sample button can be used to see the samples of the tool (sometimes with combination with other tools) in action. If needed, you can choose to apply the effect as seen in the sample by clicking on it. This will save you a lot of effort, since doing it manually would require quite a few clicks and tweaks and the use of more than one tool.

The One Clicks link takes you to the same Samples gallery that can be accessed by using the sample button from the Quick fix tools. Here too, applying the effects in a sample requires a couple of clicks. There are too many samples on display, with all of them grouped under different headings accessible from the drop box on the top of the sidebar.

The All Effects and Adjustments link displays the 42 tools currently available on the site. The tools are filtered by default, and this can be changed from the drop down box on the top of the list.

The Changes link alongside the Undo and Redo links on top of the image can be used to launch a box on the right side that lists all the effects that have been applied to the image so far. Effects can be quickly accessed by clicking on their names from this box. If



required, the effects can be undone in a non-sequential manner, which is a useful feature, not seen in any of the image editors reviewed so far. If needed, the effect can also be stored under a different category—My Effects—which is present on the left sidebar (needs registration). The effects thus saved can be easily accessed.

The final image can be downloaded to your PC or saved in the P2L account, provided you have signed up. The quality of the JPG image to be saved can be changed from the account settings link, again, provided you have signed up. By default the quality is set at 90 per cent. The default size of the image to be displayed while editing it can also be set here. This size refers to the displayed size and not the actual size of the image.

P2L is an excellent service, minus the starting troubles. By avoiding the usual interface cues—toolbar, menu, toolbox, icons and buttons—P2L has managed to make the site and the image editing process appear less intimidating to the lay person. Of course, the capabilities of the site are second to none.

## Conclusion

With many good image editors available for free download, at first glance, online image editors seem redundant. But a close look at the features offered by free offline image editing software shows that they are significantly under-featured than their online counterparts. While they all offer the basic functions—rotate, crop and resize—more interesting features that are commonly available in online sites such as adding special effects Charcoal, Blur and Softening, etc., are frequently absent

Online Image Editors fill a very important void. Users who require something more than what is offered by most free software or are not willing to spend money for the more powerful paid coun-



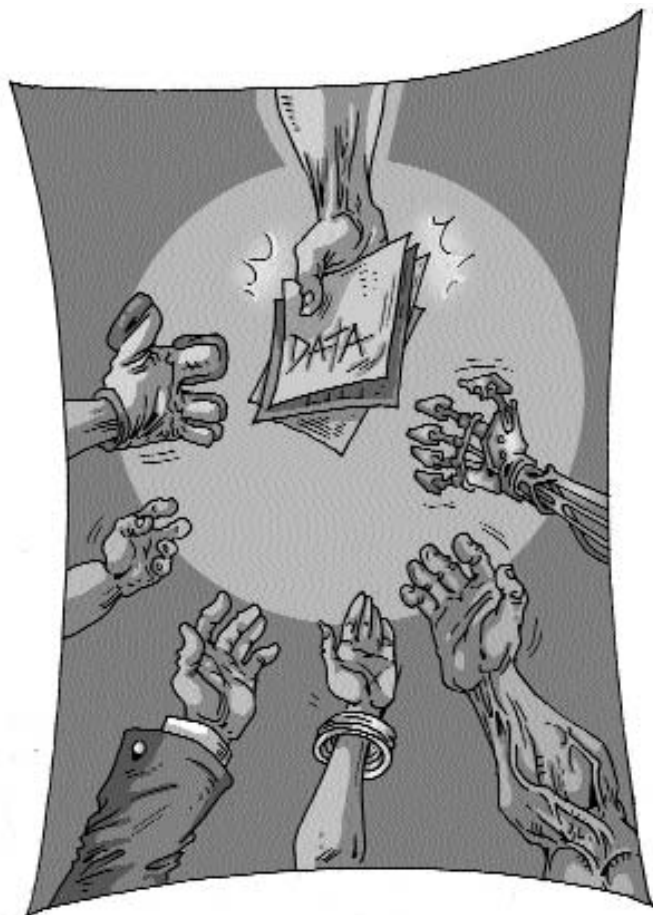
P2L's quick  
fix options

P2L's one  
click's sample  
gallery and  
categories

terparts, will find online image editors really useful. The fact that they can be used right away, without requiring any download and installation also works in their favour. Also, the meteoric rise in the use of social networking sites and image sharing sites makes it more convenient to edit and store images online without going through the download, edit and upload cycle.

Adobe, the makers of Photoshop, which is considered to be the most popular image editing software (and costs a bomb!), is expected to launch an online service of its own—Photoshop Express. And this is a good indication of the direction that the wind is blowing.

# File Sharing



**T**he most popular way to transfer data across the Net is through the client / server model; the alternative, and now very popular, method is called the Peer-to-Peer or P2P model. In this chapter, we are concerned with the latter.

## 4.1 BitTorrent

### 4.1.1 Introduction

Bram Cohen created BitTorrent, the first BitTorrent client, using the Python programming language. It is considered rather basic. This drawback was rectified by buying  $\mu$ Torrent—another BT client—and re-branding it. All versions of BitTorrent up to 5.2 are “original.” BitTorrent is open source and cross-platform. We shall discuss the last original version of BitTorrent (5.2).

At first glance, the spartan interface of BitTorrent makes it clear that simplicity of use is the focus here. There are comparatively fewer buttons and menu options.

### 4.1.2 Usage

A new torrent download can be started by clicking on the Add button and providing the path or URL to the torrent file. The location to save the datafile is asked next, after which the download begins.

Torrent   File List   Peer List   Speed   Comments   Log						
Address	Client	% complete	KB/s...	KB/s up	Downloaded	
91.66.129.87	Azureus 3.0.4.2	100.0	1 KB/s	0 KB/s	32 KB	
bas8-montrealak-1096610...	$\mu$ Torrent 1.7.5.0	100.0	1 KB/s	0 KB/s	128 KB	
IS9F5E608.versanet.de	Azureus 2.5.0.0	100.0	1 KB/s	0 KB/s	32 KB	
chello084112052122.29.1...	Shareaza 2.3.0.0	100.0	0 KB/s	0 KB/s	16 KB	
static-business-212-101-2...	Azureus 3.0.4.2	100.0	0 KB/s	0 KB/s	16 KB	
adsl-dyn-88-208-130-194...	BitLord 1.01	100.0	0 KB/s	0 KB/s	0 B	

Peer statistics (stats) in the original BitTorrent

To view the download speeds of the client, enable the View Details option under the View menu. This brings up a frame in the lower half of the client window, which shows the download speeds graphically. Other information like the total bytes transferred and the average speeds are also displayed. A torrent is accorded normal priority by default. To selectively increase or decrease the speed of a particular torrent, its priority can be increased or decreased under the Torrent menu or by accessing the torrent’s context menu.

Details of individual torrents can be viewed by clicking the Info button after selecting the torrent, or from its context menu. This will bring a pop-up window displaying statistics about the torrent—the number of connected peers, the swarm size, the seeders, etc.

You can also see the progress of each file in the torrent, and the preference for download of each file can be specified. Marking a file for first download causes it to be downloaded first.

BT also allows creating a torrent file, provided a data file. These options are available under the File menu. One can specify the piece size and the tracker URL or DHT facility too.

Once a new torrent is created, it should be uploaded to torrent sites for people interested in the datafile to be able to find it.

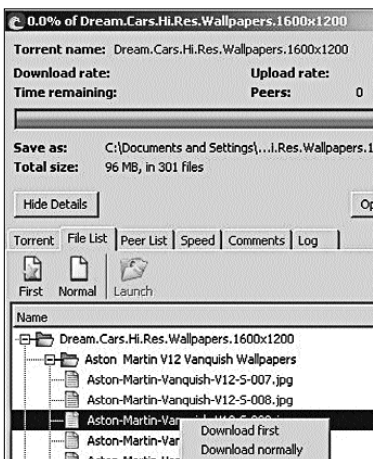
### 4.1.3 Configuration

The client's Settings are accessible under the View menu. Here, under the Network tab, one can set the maximum upload and download speeds and specify the port to be allocated to BT.

Slight modifications to the interface can also be effected under the Appearance and Language tabs. The default location to save the data file can be specified under the Saving tab.

### 4.1.4 Comments

Though simple to use, BT falls significantly short in one area—it does not allow selective downloading of files, in case a torrent has more than one file. This is an important, user-friendly feature.



Torrent options in the BitTorrent client

## 4.2 $\mu$ Torrent

### 4.2.1 Introduction

This client was a blast of fresh air in the BT arena. It offered many advantages over other existing clients—it was small in size, used considerably fewer system resources, and offered all the features required in a BT client—and it was free of wares (spy, ad, mal, *et al*). All the good points in its favour resulted in  $\mu$ Torrent (uT) being bought out by Bram Cohen's BitTorrent. The latest version of BitTorrent (version 6) is just a re-branded  $\mu$ Torrent. For this reason, this guide on uT also applies to BT version 6.

### 4.2.2 Usage

At first launch, the Speed Guide module is executed. This includes basic configuration routines that verify if your system has the required networking features enabled. The speed guide allows you to test the speed of the connection by connecting to **dslreports.com** (which launches the default browser); you can specify the maximum bandwidth to be allocated for data transfer, and if necessary, whether data should be encrypted. Port Mapping can also be enabled here, but this applies to PCs on a LAN connected to the Net through a router.

General Peers Pieces Files Speed Logger							
#	Size	# of Blocks	Blocks	Completed	Availability	Mode	
114	256 kB	16		14	29	slow	
432	256 kB	16		13	29	slow	
594	256 kB	16		1	28	slow	
1330	256 kB	16		3	29	fast	
1796	256 kB	16		12	29	fast	
2130	256 kB	16		1	29	fast	

File piece statistics in  $\mu$ Torrent

$\mu$ Torrent can be used right out of the box. Any torrent can be opened by using the File menu. This pops up the Torrent options windows, which lists the files included in the torrent. Here you can select those files that need to be downloaded. The location to save the downloaded file can also be specified.

A Hash check can identify corrupt files before beginning the download, and is enabled by default. This can be disabled in the File Open window to speed up the proceedings a bit. Under the

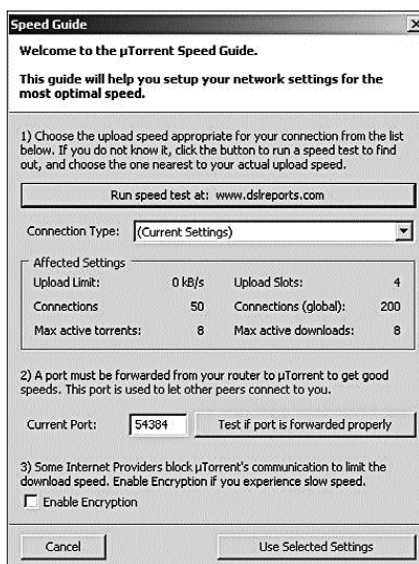
Advanced options, the maximum upload and download bandwidth can be specified.

The main window is split into different frames, with the lower frame providing a host of information about the download and upload progress. This frame can be disabled from the View menu. The file lists are displayed, and right-clicking on any file presents the options on allocating priority to that particular file.

The general tab shows information like the number of peers connected, the number of pieces in the file, the hash value, the amount of data that was discarded because of corruption, etc. Under the Peers tab, you can see the connected peers.  $\mu$ Torrent not only tracks the IP address, but also finds the geographic location of the IP with regard to nationality. Under the Pieces tab, you can see the download progress of each piece of the data file. The speed tab displays a real-time graph of the data transfer speeds for download and upload.

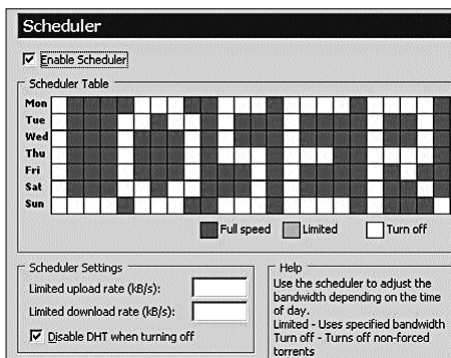
Right-clicking on the torrent displays a context menu that allows the various settings of the torrent to be modified. Under the Advanced option, the Download Bar can be enabled. This is a small status bar that displays the progress of the torrent. It can be positioned anywhere on the screen, and is visible even when uT is minimised to the System Tray. The bandwidth allocation can be changed per torrent on the fly using the context menu.

$\mu$ Torrent supports a system of categorising torrents based on user-specified labels. Torrents that have the same label are clubbed under that heading making it easier to access them.



The  $\mu$ Torrent speed guide

To create a torrent file, select Create New Torrent under the File menu. The data file or folder needs to be identified. Piece size can be set manually or set to auto. The tracker URL needs to be provided. A list of public trackers can be easily downloaded from the Net, or the torrent can



The Scheduler in µTorrent has a host of options

be created without one—in which case other means to discover peers will be used. Clicking on Start Seeding will load the torrent once the hashing is complete. Initial Seeding is a special mode of seeding, which can be activated from the torrent's Properties link (available in the context menu). Rather than randomly upload pieces to peers, in the Initial Seeding mode, the emphasis is on selectively uploading pieces so that all the pieces are available among the peers the quickest. This ensures that the superseed does not have to wait till at least one peer gets the entire data.

µTorrent allows the system to be shut down based on the status of torrents using the Auto Shutdown option under the Options menu.

### 4.2.3 Configuration

µTorrent can be further configured with the Preferences option under the Options menu. Here, under the Connections link, you can specify the maximum bandwidth to be allocated for µTorrent for downloading and uploading. Under the BT link, you can specify the number of connections that are permitted. You can also enable the use of DHT and other methods to find peers sharing the data file. Local Peer Discovery is a method that gives preference to peers that are geographically closer, since this improves data transfer speeds (within a given connection type). Under the Queuing link, you can specify the number of active transfers. If more torrents than this fig-



ure are added, they are automatically queued and activated only when an active torrent is completely downloaded. You can also automate the seeding behaviour of  $\mu$ Torrent here, setting the time or ratio before uploading should be stopped.

The Scheduler link is useful to control the behaviour of  $\mu$ Torrent during different times of the day and during different days of the week. This feature will be useful only for those who have an unlimited connection and leave their PCs on all day. Each day is split into one-hour durations, and the bandwidth to be used for that hour can be set to one of three values—Full Speed, Limited, or Turned Off. Dragging the mouse over the intervals will set the speed limits, and is easier than individually clicking on each box. The limits of the Limited mode can also be specified here.

Under the Downloads link, you can prevent the system from going into standby when downloading. This is useful since long periods of inactivity can cause the PC to enter a power saving mode, which could cause the network to disconnect. The Advanced Link allows expert users to tweak individual parameters that influence  $\mu$ Torrent's working.

Under the Disk Cache link, the default settings can be changed according to your specifications. Disk Caching is a method of storing the frequently used data pieces in the RAM to avoid having to access the hard disk. Having a larger cache will reduce hard disk use, but in case of power failure, the amount of data lost will be larger.

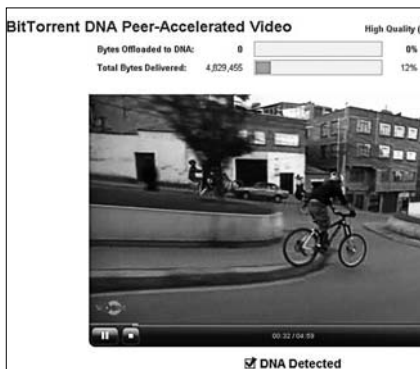
Under the User Interface link, the search engines to be used for reporting results can be changed. These engines are used by uT when you use the inbuilt search box. The default browser is launched to display the search results.

uT can also be monitored and controlled remotely. The settings for this are available under the Web UI link. If the Web Interface is enabled, uT can be controlled by typing in the IP address of the machine and the port number. By default, uT uses the same port it uses for transferring data, but this can be changed in the same window. The username and password can also be specified here.

#### 4.2.4 BT version 6

In BT 6, besides the  $\mu$ Torrent client, another module is inserted into

your system. This is called DNA or Delivery Network Accelerator. This module applies the BitTorrent principle of sharing files among peer PCs to normal downloads from Web sites. So when DNA is enabled and the PC visits a graphics-intensive site, the data that is passed on to your system comes from other peers as well as the server hosting the page. Thus the server's bandwidth is saved. You continue to upload pieces of the just-downloaded content to other users in the background, and even when the page is closed, the transfer continues in the background.



P2P for Web sites!

This is still in its infancy, and there are very few sites offering DNA-supported content. A demo can be seen at [www.bittorrent.com/dna/demo/](http://www.bittorrent.com/dna/demo/). You're not explicitly asked permission for installing DNA while installing BT 6. DNA can be switched off from the control panel or uninstalled from the Add / Remove Programs applet without effecting BT's performance.

Additionally, rather strangely, uninstalling BT doesn't remove DNA, though it is rendered ineffective.

#### 4.2.5 Comments

For those seeking a feature-rich yet lean BT client, uT is the best choice. One feature that is sorely missed is the inability to fine-tune downloading behaviour to support file preview.

## 4.3 BitComet

### 4.3.1 Introduction

If first impressions mattered, BitComet (BC) would not be on anyone's BT client list. The absurdity presented by the BitComet site

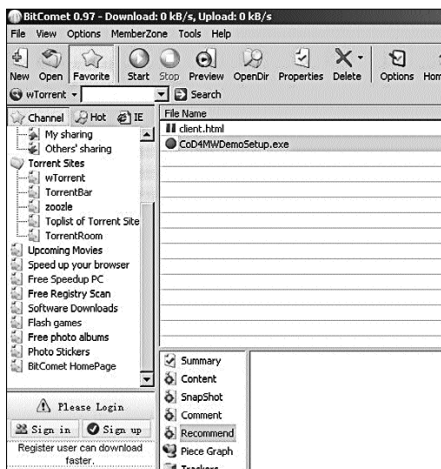
prior to downloading the client is enough to put you off. The file download is deliberately throttled by the site, leading to extremely slow downloads—3 to 4 KBps! And this is done to prove the point that downloads would be faster with BitComet installed.

In a world of abundant options, it would not be wise to expect you to silently endure this irrational behaviour—even if it is a matter of 5 MB. Besides these issues, BC is also buggy and prone to whimsical activities that are beyond your control.

BC is more than just a BT client. It bundles some tools: a Flash Video player (for .flv files beamed on sites like YouTube) that can only be accessed from the Program Files menu; the BitComet Resource Browser, which is a modified version of Internet Explorer; and a download manager. Besides these, two standalone applications can be downloaded from within BC, and though they are called plugins, they do not depend on BC for their functionality. The “plugins” are eMule, an eD2K client (discussed in a later section), and a media player (MPC star).

### 4.3.2 Usage

At every launch, unless you have tweaked your system with network utilities to maximise speeds, a pop-up will recommend increasing the number of “Half-open TCP Connections.” A TCP connection is half-open when it is awaiting confirmation from the target PC about availability of a port than can be used for data transfer. Increasing the number of allowed half-open connections allows more peers to be simultaneously contacted, which in turn increases the speed with which



The main BitComet interface

the P2P connection is made. By default, in Windows, this number is 10.

For our review, BC was installed on three different PCs. On one occasion, the left bottom quadrant contained something undecipherable—which inspired this

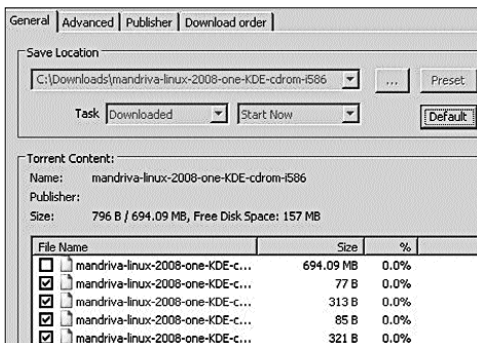
reviewer to look for the minimum system requirements for BC. Unfortunately, this was nowhere to be found—not in the installation folder, not on the Web site. Which brings one to the site itself: it is authored by someone whose name begins with a “D” (in English). On the second instance, the content in that frame showed up in English, which appeared as a login form to sign in into the BitComet site. But clicking on the Sign up link launched a Chinese-language site. Only on the third occasion did the client act as expected.

The bottom left quadrant integrates the BC site with the client. You can sign in to the BC site by the form displayed here. As a registered member, you can download content displayed on the site, some of which are free. And as the sign-in page in this quadrant reminds you, registered members can experience faster downloads.

To start a torrent, the Open Torrent option in the file menu can be used. After selecting the torrent file, a pop-up window shows the files comprising the torrent. If needed, files can be selectively downloaded.

Under the Download order, preference can be given to certain files over others by changing their downloading sequence.

BC also allows categorisation under the “task” label; torrent tasks are displayed under their respective headings on the left top quadrant, allowing quicker access. Once the transfer begins, right-clicking on the torrent reveals a lot of options. The notable ones are “Copy BC link”. This link starts off with “bc://” and can be used like the other



Selecting files to download in BitComet

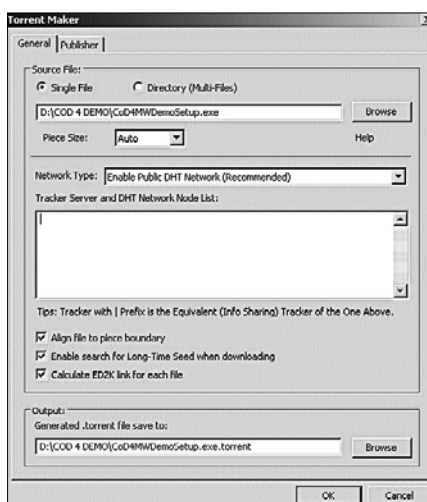
P2P link (eD2K), and carries the metadata to access the particular datafile directly without needing the torrent file. The link can be placed in any HTML file and clicking on the link will cause BC to be launched.

The other notable option is “Preview Download Mode,” which when enabled preferentially downloads the pieces of the data file that are closer to the start of the file. Doing so allows the file to be previewed, if it is a media file, before downloading a large portion.

Under the Properties of the torrent, different aspects of the data file can be configured, if that was not already done while beginning the download.

Besides usual stats like the rate of data transfer and share ratio, additional details in the form of other user’s comments can be accessed. The Comment Link opens the Web page (in the quadrant itself) where you can add comments and read other users’ comments. The comments are stored on the site, and are available to anyone who downloads the same torrent. A pictorial representation of the downloaded content is shown in the Piece Graph link. Each piece is represented as a small box in the array, with a colour to convey whether that piece has been downloaded or not.

BC insists on loading its custom search page in this quadrant, under the Summary, Content and Recommend links—every time the client is launched (this behaviour cannot be modified in the settings). So irrespective of whether any torrents are active, a few 100 KB are transferred both ways every time the client is launched. And this transfer is not reflected in the statistics (but can be detect-



The “Make Torrent” window in BitComet

ed if some network monitor or firewall is installed), which only irritates most people.

The buttons on the toolbar—movies, software, games, etc.—when clicked will take you to the BitComet Web site. Either the default browser can be used, or BC will ask whether to launch its own BC Resource Browser (a modified version of IE, like Maxthon).

BC also includes a download manager function. The link to the file to be downloaded can be captured by BC from the browser, and this will cause BC to be launched. A floating drop-box is also provided so that any link that needs to be downloaded can be dragged and dropped into it to start the client. Besides searching for mirror servers, BC can also use P2P sources to complete the download by searching for other users having the file to be downloaded. This can be enabled or disabled under the options that appear by clicking on the More button on the download file pop-up.

You can create a torrent by using the Make Torrent option under the File menu. Besides the usual options, there is an option to “Align File to Piece Boundary.” Enabling this will ensure that pieces are so created that each one would contain data from a single file only. This setting is needed only in case a torrent has multiple files. With this setting enabled, users who download individual files from a torrent will not download additional content, as would occur when a piece is shared by two files. The eD2K link for the file can also be created simultaneously, which allows the file to be accessed though that network as well.

Long Term seeds are those dedicated seeders who continue to offer the file for sharing for a long period—for example, Linux distro seeders.

BC’s feature set can be expanded by adding plugins. The eMule plugin, installable from the Tools menu, incorporates eMule in BC. eMule is a client for the eD2K P2P file sharing protocol, and is the covered in a later topic.

### 4.3.3 Configuration

Under Connection, you can set the maximum bandwidth to be allocated for BC for uploads and downloads. The Task Schedule section contains the option to set the maximum number of simulta-

neous download tasks. There is also a useful setting wherein if the total speed of all active downloads falls short of a certain limit, a new download can be automatically activated. This will ensure better utilisation of your bandwidth. The Listen port is how incoming connections connect to your PC; this port number can be set here. Under the Proxy link, BC can be configured to channel its data through the proxy.

Under the Task link, various options that control downloading behaviour can be set. By enabling “Optimize Download Strategy for Preview,” the datafile pieces closer to the start of the file are downloaded preferentially to enable previewing of the file.

Tasks are automatically stopped when certain conditions are fulfilled. These can be set under the BT task link. Here the maximum and minimum uploads rates per torrent can also be specified. Under the ED task link the port allocated to eMule can be set. Further configuration of eMule can be done from within, by launching eMule. The HTTP / FTP link contains the settings for the download manager function of BC. Here BC can be configured to monitor the Clipboard, so that when any browser copies a link, BC will be launched. BC can also be set as the default download manager for IE, and integrated as a context menu option in the browser. The type of files to be monitored can also be set. BC will be launched only if links to these file-types are clicked.

Under the appearance link, the behaviour of the UI can be set. On selecting a torrent, the default information displayed can be set under the “Default Task Related info pane.” Setting this value to “Comments” ensures that user comments are displayed by default—though this doesn’t stop the pages under the other headings from being loaded every time BC is launched. You can automatically log in to the BC site every time BC is launched, by enabling the relevant option.

Under the virus scan link, the path to the anti-virus application needs to be provided, so that once the datafile is downloaded, it can be scanned by the AV application automatically.

Under the Advanced link, the “Long Term Seeding” option can be enabled. When in this mode of operation, as the tool-tip informs, stopped tasks are automatically started. The “Boss Key” is the key

combination to hide the application in a hurry—the icon in the System Tray is also hidden.

BC also incorporates a scheduler which is similar in operation and configuration to the one seen in  $\mu$ Torrent.

#### 4.3.4 Comments

If the initial prejudices can be overcome, BC proves to be a capable BT/eD2K client. The core application itself stands out for a few reasons—its ability to prioritise data file pieces based on their location in the file, and the ability to preview media files—which is a by-product of the former ability, and the integration of the online site features with the application core. For those looking for a simple BT client, BC will seem bloated, especially after a session with uT. The absence of any graphical representation of the data transfer speeds is a major let down (besides the bugs).

Nonetheless, the ability to fine-tune the download process to allow faster previews is a must-have, especially for those who download huge media files. The ability to read and add comments without visiting an external site will also encourage users to express their views about the file, which can be of use to other peers. For these reasons, one can indeed overlook the irritants in BitComet.

## 4.4 Azureus

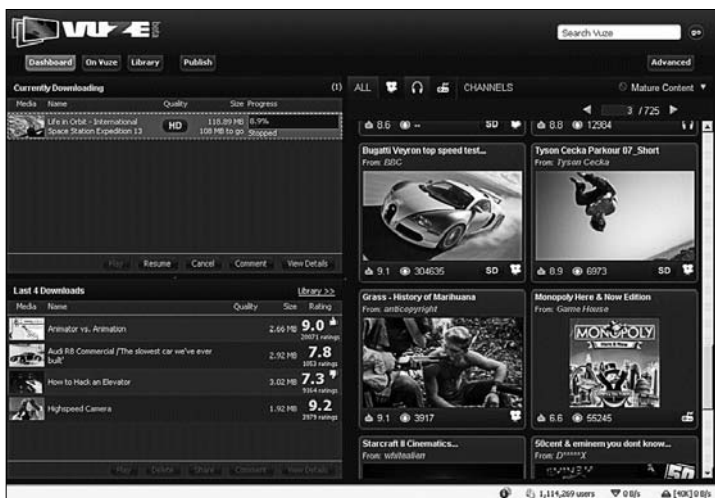
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### 4.4.1 Introduction

This is a BT client written in Java, so it requires the independently-available Java Runtime Environment to be installed. It uses comparatively higher resources than any other BT client. Since it is coded in Java, it is cross-platform, as long as the JRE is installed.

The latest version of Azureus is 3.0.4. With the launch of version 3, Azureus Inc. was renamed Vuze Inc (pronounced “views”), and is positioned as an entertainment delivery portal / company that uses Azureus and the BT protocol to deliver content. There is a tight integration of the BT client with the online media portal, in a manner that is seen in BC—dedicated buttons that take you to sites offering





The Azureus (Vuze) Dashboard

content of that particular type, movies, songs, TV shows, etc. The default interface, called Vuze, is too graphics-intensive for some people, with shiny tabs and rounded edges, and obviously is a resource hog (consuming 90 MB of memory).

#### 4.4.2 Usage

At first launch, content from Vuze.com is automatically loaded in the client under the Dashboard tab. Borrowing design elements from Windows Media Player 11, the interface is polished, with the right half showing the files that are being shared by other users and the left showing files that are on your PC. The Vuze interface is probably one of the best examples of user-friendly BT implementation in the Audio / Video content distribution arena—similar to what is experienced at YouTube, except that in this case, the data is also transferred via P2P.

The technicalities of downloading a torrent, seeding, and leeching are all relegated to the background, with your only task being finding interesting content and downloading it. Files being shared by other users and available on the site are listed under different categories—TV shows, movies, etc.

All you have to do is click to download the file. After the file is downloaded, it can be played with the inbuilt media player interface. Downloaded files are displayed under the Library tab as well.

Content once downloaded will be uploaded to others when needed, but there is no status indicator for uploads and downloads, no graphs, no share ratio, etc. to divert your attention from the primary job of enjoying the content.

The Vuze interface allows you to rate downloaded content; the rating is stored on the site and shared with other users. When playing downloaded content, the interface handles it smoothly, without launching an external media player. The interface also has a search facility and the results are displayed right in the application without launching the default browser. The term “torrent” is nowhere to be seen in any of the results or file names. Everything is handled very efficiently. The only time you are presented with the “t” word is when a specific torrent file needs to be downloaded, and for this, the Open option in the file menu needs to be used. After browsing to and selecting the relevant torrent file, the torrent is included in the dashboard where the download progress can be viewed. You are saved the labour of identifying a download location or setting the priority for the download or selecting the files in the torrent.

Even the job of creating a torrent file from a data file that you intend to share is simplified. This can be done in the Publish tab. The emphasis is on multimedia content, since Audio and Video are the only two categories of content that can be shared—though selecting an EXE file and categorising it as a video or audio file doesn’t bring up any errors.

The torrents are hosted at Vuze.com, and after the torrent is created, the file is uploaded to the site. You are presented with the option to “Share for Free,” though a “Make money” option sometimes flashes before being hidden

**PUBLISH**

Only upload material for which you own the rights or have the express permission of the owner. Do not upload content that is inappropriate or infringes on the original copyright, sexually explicit or graphically violent content, major motion pictures, television shows, or these types of upload violate our [Terms of Service](#).

1. Choose Content

Upload a Single File

Select this option if your content is contained in a single file or an archive/zip file (e.g. Video, ...)

Upload a Folder

Select this option if your content is composed of several files (e.g. Music Album, Pictures, ...)

\* Media type:

2. Choose Your Pricing

☒ Share for free

The “Publishing” options in Azureus

(probably limited to users in the US). You first have to create an account at the site before publishing content, which is easily accomplished under the same tab.

While the Vuze interface is adequate for someone looking for an experience similar to that offered at YouTube, or for people venturing into torrent territory for the first time, it is insufficient when greater control needs to be exercised on other aspects of torrent downloading—like file selection, bandwidth control, queuing, etc. since no options to do so are presented in the interface. This requires firing up the Advanced interface. The Advanced tab is placed so far away from the other tabs, it seems to have been cold-shouldered by the developers! Switching over to the Advanced mode will reveal the more familiar controls to open a torrent and watch the progress bar and other statistics about the torrent. All the files being shared, and listed in the Dashbar and Library tabs, can also be viewed here. The menu bar also fills up with a lot more options when in the Advanced mode—and this is the only way one can change the default behaviour of Azureus. And since this mode doesn't use too much eye-candy, the system memory usage is reduced to half.

Under the Advanced tab, the Change UI button is prominently displayed. Using this the default interface can be set. Switching to the Classic interface requires an application restart.

Here the familiar options as seen in other BT clients make their appearance. Right-clicking on any torrent will display additional options.

The View Details option in the context menu offers the usual statistical information about the torrent data transfers. Two interesting bits of information are the Piece Map visible under the Peers and Pieces Tabs.

Here, each datafile bit is represented as a box, and is coloured differently based on whether it has been downloaded or not. The numbers reflect the number of peers having that piece with them. Selecting a Peer in the Peers tab will reveal the status of that peer's file download progress. The Swarm tab displays a pictorial representation of the P2P network connected with the same torrent file.

The Context menu also allows changing the transfer bandwidths on the fly, under the Advanced link. A novel feature in Azureus is the

creation of a “Magnet” link that can be inserted in an ordinary Web page. Clicking on the link, if Azureus is installed, will allow the data file to be downloaded without having the associated torrent file. This is similar in operation to the BC link created in BitComet. The option to create the Magnet link is available in the Context menu. Under the Options tab, the data transfer speeds can be set.

#### 4.4.3 Configuration

The **Tools > Options** menu offers the configuration settings for Azureus. Under the Transport Encryption link, the option to encrypt the data transfer and the mode to do so can be configured. Under the Transfer link, the number and bandwidth limits of connection with other peers can be configured. Here, Azureus can also be configured to download pieces of the file that are closer to start and end of the file, which will help in previewing the file before a large part is downloaded. Additionally, files that have a higher completion rate can be preferred over those that are just starting out. Azureus can automatically control the speeds of data transfers to prevent one file hogging all the bandwidth. Auto-Speed is a facility to control the transfer bandwidth automatically. This is done by regularly checking the total bandwidth and adjusting the limits. The different options for this facility, including the checking frequency, can be set here. Under the LAN settings, a different set of speed limits can be set for peers on the same LAN as yourself. Under the Performance link under the File tree, one can set the disk caching options. Different aspects of the interface can be set under the Interface link.

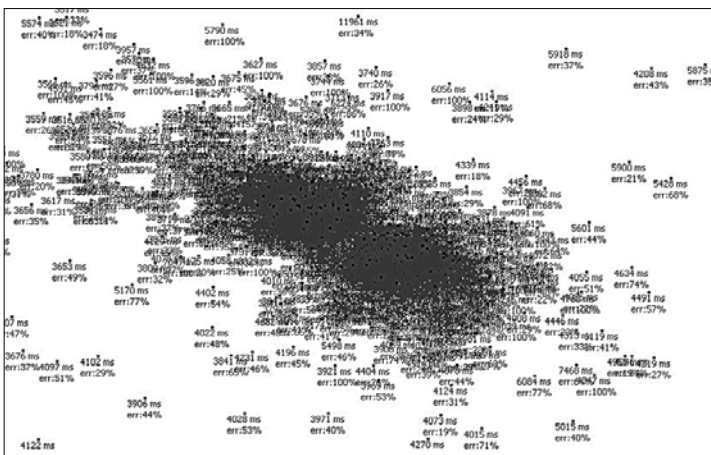
The Mode link lets you set a level of expertise. This will influence the configurable options available to you. By default the user mode is set to Beginner, in which case some of the links in the Options tab are unavailable. Setting the mode to Advanced will free these options. IP Filter links can be used to block peers by their IP. The condition of marking a peer for blocking can be set, based on the amount of bad data sent. Azureus has an inbuilt tracker, which can be activated under the Tracker-Server link. To be able to do this, the external IP of your PC needs to be entered. This can be automatically found by clicking on the Auto Discover

button. With the internal tracker enabled, the next time you create a new torrent, the option to use the inbuilt tracker becomes available. Under the Queue link, one can set different conditions under which to stop or start active transfer of torrents.

Under the Tools—Statistics menu, one tool worth a look is Vivaldi. Though not of much practical use, Azureus claims it is a positioning system that is created from the ping times of each peer. The map is unique for each user since the ping times from each user is used to create it. The map can be zoomed with the ping times of each peer displayed in milliseconds. Besides the Vivaldi tab, the other tabs in the Statistics window display other information about the usage of cache and Distributable database (also called DHT) which is used by a peer to find other peers without using a tracker.

#### 4.4.4 Comments

Azureus shows the path ahead with regard to the opportunities for legal use of P2P technologies. The slick veneer of a multimedia platform, smoothly hiding the intricacies of P2P technology, is bound to attract many users who are interested in only the content. This lends credibility to Vuze's claim of being one of the most popular (aren't they all?) multimedia portals.



Do take a look at the Vivaldi tool

## 4.5 BitTyrant

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This is a modified version of Azureus version 2.5. The sole difference between these clients is in the way BitTyrant preferentially allocates more upload bandwidth to those peers that send more data to you.

By default, in any BT client, the upload bandwidth is equally distributed among the connected peers. BitTyrant does not limit upload bandwidth; rather, it distributes it in proportion to the download bandwidth available from the peers. For example, if a you're downloading a file from two peers, with one peer sending data at 10 kbps and the other at 20 kbps, BitTyrant will preferentially upload data to the latter peer at twice the rate it uploads to the former. It is claimed that doing so improves the download speeds of swarms by up to 70 per cent!

The interface and configuration options of BitTyrant are similar to those in Azureus (using the Classic interface).

## 4.6 eMule

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### 4.6.1 Introduction

eMule is an eD2K client—the most popular one.

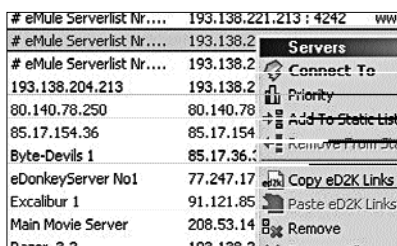
### 4.6.2 Usage

When eMule is launched the first time, a wizard guides you through the different steps to configure the system to connect to the network. After the initial configuration, it presents a list of servers. These are the servers that hold information about other peers and the files that they are sharing. To connect to any network, you select it and click the Connect button.

After a server has been connected to, the files shared by the other users in the network can be searched. If the desired file is being shared by anybody, and shows up in the search results, it can be downloaded. The search results can be sorted under different heads like Availability and Complete Sources. It is best to select a copy with more sources in case more than one copy of the file is found.

eMule also implements a serverless network, called Kademlia, shortened to KAD. This is similar in principle to DHT or Peer Exchange in case of the BT protocol. Since it is possible to configure the client

to work only on the KAD network, you can find additional sources of files if connected to KAD in addition to eD2K. After connecting to KAD, the required file should be searched for just as in the case of the regular eD2K network.



A typical server list view in eMule

Right-clicking on any file being downloaded will offer additional options. The file bits can be preferentially downloaded to aid quicker Previewing by enabling the “Download Parts needed for Preview First” option in the context menu. The priority of the download can also be similarly set. Details about the file being downloaded can be accessed by clicking on the Details option in the context menu. This will pop up a windows with details about the peers, the download speed, etc. One useful feature is the Content tab, which can list the contents of the file being downloaded in case it is an archive.

eMule also incorporates an IRC client, which can be used to chat with other peers. This can be a great place for newbies to seek tips on mastering eMule.

Clicking on the Statistics button will bring up a lot of facts and figures about the data transfers, in the form of real-time graphs and also historical data.

The Shared Folders button lists the files that have been shared by you. Right-clicking on the file will allow the creation of eD2K links for those particular files. These links can be included in normal Web pages, and clicking on these links will allow users to access that file, given that an application that can handle eD2K links is installed.

### 4.6.3 Configuration

eMule can be configured by clicking the Options button.

Under the Display link, some settings to save system resources can be enabled—for example, “Disabling Known Clients List.” Under the Connection link, the maximum data transfer limits can be set. You can also check if the ports are properly opened to allow data transfers here. Under the Directories link, the locations to save down-

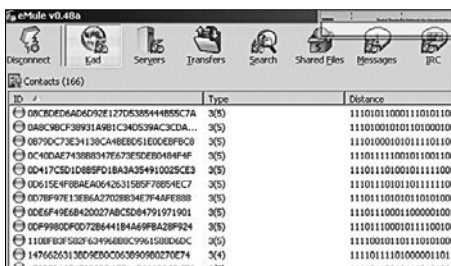
loaded data can be specified, and the directory that is shared with other peers can be selected. After a folder has been marked as shared, the contents of the folder are scanned and hash values created. The filenames are associated with the hash values. The hashing process can be time-consuming depending on the number and size of files shared, though no progress bar is displayed.

Under the Files link, the downloading behaviour can be modified to allow quicker previews by enabling “Try to download preview chunks first.” eMule can also be configured to launch every time an eD2K link is copied, by enabling “Watch Clipboard for eD2K file links.” Under the IRC link, the username to be used while chatting, and the IRC server to connect to, can be specified. Under the Security link, the option to enable Protocol Obfuscation is available, which can be used in case eMule data is being blocked by the ISP. IP filter can be used to block certain peers from connecting to you. An online source can also be specified to take advantage of other users’ knowledge of known offensive peers. Under the Scheduler link, eMule can be configured to automatically start downloads at set times on set days of the week.

You can control eMule running on any PC by accessing the IP address of the PC with the port number specified here. Under the Extended link, advanced options can be set. Here, the disk cache to be used can be set. Enabling the “Use Credit system (reward uploaders)” allows those with favourable share ratios to enjoy faster downloads.

#### 4.6.4 Comments

eMule is a user-friendly client to share data on the eD2K network. The ability to manage downloads to allow faster previews is a definite plus.



Making a KAD connection using eMule



## 4.7 Shareaza

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### 4.7.1 Introduction

This is a client that works on various P2P networks: Gnutella, Gnutella 2, eD2K, and BT, though it is positioned mainly as a Gnutella 2 client. It also incorporates a download manager.

### 4.7.2 Usage

After installation, Shareaza connects to the Gnutella 2 network automatically. While the number of connections seems small in comparison to eMule, the nature of the Gnutella network ensures that this is of little significance.

The Gnutella / Gnutella 2 protocol network is in the Hub and Spoke (or leaf) architecture. So connecting to two hubs means that one is indirectly connected to all the spokes in the hubs, and since some of these spokes are also connected to other Hubs, even those peer's shared files are accessible to you. The number of peers that are connected to you are displayed in the status bar. If needed, connections to the Gnutella network and eD2K network can also be made by clicking on the buttons bearing their names.

The Home interface is presented upon launch of the program. In this view, a summary of all the activities and status of the client can be had. The number of peers connected to, the downloads in progress, etc. are all mentioned. There is a search box which can be used to find content shared by other peers, which is the first step.

For greater control on the search process, the Search interface can be accessed by clicking on the Search button. You can specify which network to search in—eD2K or Gnutella or Gnutella 2. The search results are displayed in the application itself.

The range of the search is displayed under the search box, showing the number of hubs and leaves searched. Details about the files being shared by other peers are listed, along with properties of the connection, including the number of copies, speed of that connection, etc. It is best to select a file that has the higher Host / Count and the highest download rates. After selecting the file, one uses the context menu to download the file.

Shareaza can also be used to directly retrieve data from the shared folder of another peer using the Gnutella 1 or 2 protocol. For

this, right-click on any of the connected peers and select “Browse User”. This will display a list of files shared by that peer, if that peer has enabled the browsing feature. Files that are marked for downloads appear in the Transfer interface. All data transfer actions are listed under the



The main interface window of Shareaza

Transfer tab. Here, details regarding the speed of transfer, the number of peers, etc. are listed. Hovering the cursor over the entry will display a graph showing the transfer speeds.

Files shared by connected users, as displayed in the Network interface, can also be directly browsed by using the Browse user option in the context menu. Adding a torrent file for download can be done by accessing Download file / Torrent option in the Tools menu. This will pop up a window asking for the torrent file. Once provided, the BT network is connected to. Further options cannot be specified, like downloading selected files only, or the priority of the download. The same window can also be used to download files from Web pages. The Home interface also offers a link to launch the download window.

Shareaza can also be used to continue partial downloads done in eMule. Partially-downloaded files are named .part by default, and loading these files in Shareaza will resume the download. This facility can be accessed from the Tools menu. The location of the eMule temporary folder needs to be provided, and Shareaza imports the relevant files from it.

Shareaza has an integrated media player which can be used to preview downloaded media files without starting an external player.

### 4.7.3 Configuration

Shareaza can be configured by using the Settings option under the Tools menu. Under the Web link, the filetypes and protocols to be associated with Shareaza can be set.

Piolet is (yet) another P2P file sharing network that Shareaza can work with. Under the Connection link, the bandwidth allocated for upload and downloads can be specified. Under the Download link, the number of active downloads and speed limits for this can be specified. Under the Upload link, upload limits can be specified. The remote access link presents the options to allow the client to be remotely controlled from another PC. The Scheduler allows programming of the client to download at specific times of the day and sets the limits to download. Under the Network link, the different networks to be connected to can be specified, and the connection characteristics tweaked. Since Shareaza cannot create torrents, the external agent to do so can be assigned here. Shareaza comes bundled with a few skins, and these can be applied under the Skins link. The Plugin link displays the plugins already installed in Shareaza, and the behaviour of each can be configured. The Advanced link displays the various options that experts might want to configure.

#### 4.7.4 Comments

Shareaza is the Swiss Army Knife of P2P clients. Those seeking simpler interfaces would be put off by the gaudiness, but the features on offer more than justify the discomfiture.

## 4.8 DC++

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### 4.8.1 Introduction

This is a client for the Direct Connect P2P protocol. Like eD2K, DC also has hubs that store information about the peers connected to them, and the files shared by each.

### 4.8.2 Usage

DC++ can be comparatively challenging to use. At first launch, you are presented with a blank window with no messages or Wizard to help out. The first step is to configure the client by visiting the Settings option in the File menu. Once the client has been set up with the bare basics—specifying a nick / username and identifying a share folder—selecting the Public Hubs option under the View menu will bring up the list of DC Hubs available.

The massive list can be sorted under various headings, including number of users, minimum share size, and nationality. Right-clicking on any hub will present the option to Connect to it. If selected, the client will attempt to connect to the hub. Once connected, you are presented with a welcome message and a chat window displaying the list of other peers on the hub. If, for any reason, you are unwelcome, a reason is specified along with the disconnection message. You can connect to more than one hub at a time.



A typical view of a public hub listing in DC++

If successfully connected, either the search function can be used to find a particular file in the hub, or files shared by individual users can be browsed. To search for files, you use the Search option in the view menu. The hubs to be searched can be selected. After entering the terms to be searched and clicking on the Search button, be prepared to wait! Alternatively, right-clicking on the Peer name in the chat window will give you the option to Get File List. Selecting this will generate a list of files shared by that peer, unless all the uploads slots set by the peer are already occupied—in which case a relevant message is displayed, and you will have to retry.

Once the needed file is found, right-clicking on it presents the option to download it. Once that is selected, the download process begins, and the progress is displayed in the status panel below. By default the file is downloaded to the location mentioned in the settings (while configuring the client), but the file can be saved in an alternative location by choosing the Download to option.

### 4.8.3 Configuration

The client can be configured by using the Settings option in the File menu. At least the nick field in the Personal Information column needs to be filled, since otherwise, connecting to a hub will be difficult (there exist scripts that disconnects a user without a nick (username)). Under the Connection Settings, the details about how you are connected to the Net needs to be provided, which is of concern only

if you are not directly connected. Under the Downloads link, the location to save downloaded files to can be set. The maximum number of simultaneous connections can be specified here. Public Hub lists are lists of DC hubs addresses available from different online sites. It is best not to modify this, unless you have achieved some level of expertise (in which case you wouldn't be reading this!). Under the Queue settings, the client can be configured to automatically prioritise / de-prioritise files based on size; similarly, sources of data can be dropped if they do not meet specified criteria. Under Sharing, you can specify the folder that can be accessible to other peers.

Since many hubs limit peers without a minimum shared data size, it is recommended to ensure that an empty folder is not being shared. Once a folder is shared, its contents are scanned and hash values prepared. Depending on the size of files shared, this process can be lengthy, and so you can relegate the hashing process to the background. Files will not be shared before they are hashed.

The number of upload slots can be specified here. Under the Appearance link, the visual aspects of the bland interface can be spruced up—just a bit. The Advanced link offers additional tweaking options. The option to “Register with windows to handle magnet:URI links” will ensure that clicking on such a link will launch DC++.

#### 4.8.4 Comments

DC++ offers a lean interface that is similar to that of  $\mu$ Torrent in many ways. Since no other client (except for Strong DC++, which is very similar) supports the Direct Connect protocol, you are left with a Hobson's choice!

## 4.9 Conclusion

Every network has its advantages and disadvantages. While BitTorrent is the fastest way to get the latest content, the other networks offer greater interaction between peers. Data retention is the poorest in BT while it is possible to find the most arcane stuff in the niche hubs in DC networks. You just need to know where to look.

# Online Social Networking Sites



**I**t is believed that early man used sign language to communicate with each other. Later on he learnt to talk. Then, he began to use smoke signals to communicate over long distances. Then came the advent of letter writing. The 19th century has witnessed the invention of the telegraph and telephone and as a result human interaction has become easier. But the most phenomenal method of communication and interaction evolved in the 20th century—the Internet.

The Web started from bulletin board services and forums and has evolved to a more complex method of social interaction—social networking sites. The sites offer a safe, secure and fun-filled way for people to connect, interact and socialise on the Internet. We did some research on the popular as well as and not-so-popular sites, and cover ten of them here:

- Facebook
- Orkut
- Fropper
- BigAdda
- Yaari
- MySpace
- Friendster
- OkCupid
- Hi5
- Forums

## 5.1 Orkut

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Orkut is the site to start with. Who has not heard of Orkut? Started a few years ago, this is perhaps the most popular social networking site amongst Indians. The site has been developed by Google, and your Google Account login works here too.

If you do not already have a Google Account, this site will help you get one. Google sends you an activation link to your email account and once you click on it, your account is activated. When you sign in, the first thing you want to do is enter your complete personal details. Click on the “Edit Profile” link to the left of the page and you are taken to a page showing four links. Click on the general link to enter basic information about you. This includes information like age, interests, hobbies, favourite music and movies. Click on the social link to enter information about your height, looks and your ideal match. The contact link is used to enter your contact information such as your e-mail ID, your cell number and your address. The last link, professional, lets you key in information about your professional life. In your profile, you can decide on the information fields that should be

visible only to you, your friends or the general public. This kind of granular level control can be applied by you on fields such as age, e-mail ID, cell number and address—fields you may not want to reveal in totality. Remember, your profile is what others view when they browse for friends, so it can be the deciding factor in catching someone's interest.



The Orkut Home Page

The next thing you would want to do is upload your photos on the site, so that people can see how good you look! Similar to your profile, a photo definitely makes a difference in catching anyone's attention. You can even upload short videos of yours on the site. You have to upload the video to either Google Video or YouTube and specify the link to the video on Orkut.

To start interacting with people you can search for people and write in their scrapbooks, or else you can join a community on this site. There are all sorts of communities out there having people with common interests such as entertainment, sports, health, literature, technology, computers and what not. You may be slightly shy, but joining one of these could get you invites to events that these communities hold and you could start building a social circle.

You could also build your own social circle by inviting people to your own events. If you are a little rushed, when you search for people you can even mark them as your favourites or as your crushes and contact them later—similar to tagging or bookmarking the “important” ones.

If you are the bold kind, you could either directly message people or message them later after they have responded to your scraps. There is also a provision for blogging on the site and people can respond to your blogs and of course you can post replies to other blogs too.

Orkut is a must-sign-up-for site if you want to be visible in the online social networking circuit.



## 5.2 MySpace

MySpace is yet another popular social networking site on the Internet. True to its name, it gives people their own space on the Web. This site, like Orkut, offers the facilities to socialise, to make friends and join communities of people who share similar interests.



The MySpace Home Page

Once again, to get started, sign up for this service. Once you sign up, this site sends you an activation link at your e-mail address and once you click on it, your “space” is activated. Once again enter your complete personal details after signing in. Click on the “Edit Profile” link on the right side of your name and you are taken to a page where you can enter more on your personal details. In the “Personal Info” tab, there are several links. Click on “Interests and Personality” to enter your hobbies, favourite film stars, favourite movies, and favourite music. Next go to the name section to enter your full nomenclature! Move on to Basic Info to enter your e-mail id, cell number, address, and other details. Like Orkut, this site too offers granular control over the visibility of several items. On the background and lifestyle page you could specify on fields such as drinking, smoking and what you are looking for on the site.

On the “Schools” page, enter the names of the institutions where you have studied and on the “Companies” page enter your work details which includes the nature of your work, your place of work, and the name of the firm. On the networking page, you can see your friends, while on the “Song and Video” page, you can upload songs you may have sung or for that matter any other song and videos about yourself or your friends that you want to share.

The next tab after the Personal Info tab is the Groups tab, where you can see a list of groups that you are the moderator of and on the Comments tab you can see the comments people have posted to you.

Before uploading videos, we do recommend uploading your photo so that you make a good first impression on people's searches. Just as the case in Orkut, you can browse for friends and mail them. You can invite friends to join your network and similarly widen your social circle. Here, too you can mark people as your favourites during searches in order to mail them at leisure. These people would be distinctly visible on another page in your "space", a feature similar to Orkut. On MySpace you have blogs and forums as well. Blogs and forums are somewhat similar, but blogs are usually larger in content than forums are. Also, forums are more of a discussion on various topics, while blogs are more descriptive of your experiences or are short stories like a diary. You can join various groups on MySpace too. After all, there are people with common interests such as sports, books, entertainment, movies, arts, and crafts. You can also attend events or invite people to events on MySpace. What distinguishes MySpace from Orkut is MySpaceTV. This shows video clips such as the latest movie trailers, funny videos similar to YouTube or Metacafe. This site provides people with audio entertainment in the form of music and songs as well. We rank this site highly as well.

## 5.3 Facebook

Facebook is yet another online social networking site on the Web. The name, as we gather, means a book of faces or a collection of faces. Just like Orkut and MySpace, this site too, offers the facilities to meet people, make friends and socialise on the Web.

As in the earlier cases, to get started on Facebook, you need to sign up. Click on the activation link that Facebook sends to your e-mail account and follow the three steps that ensue. Step one does a search for friends from your e-mail address book who are already on



The Facebook Home Page

Facebook. Step two is to enter the name of your school, university and company so that Facebook can search for people from those institutions who are already on Facebook. Finally enter your country name and you are through.

Next, as with Orkut and MySpace, complete the entry of your profile. Click on the “edit” link next to the Profile link on your home page. On Facebook, you find a Basic page where you enter basic information such as your age, location, profession—whether you are in school, college or working. On the Contact page you could enter your e-mail id, cell number, and address. Once again, be assured of the visibility of these items. In relationships enter whether you are looking for just friends, dating or serious relationships.

Move on to the Personal page to enter your interests, hobbies and your favourites. Specify your education and work details in the next two pages and then proceed to upload your photo to the site.

Facebook offers you the same plethora of features that MySpace and Orkut do. Once done with your personal details, you can make friends by searching and messaging them or joining groups of like-minded people on this site. If you don’t want to jump into this right away you or do not want to write messages in peoples’ scrapbooks, you could “poke” them, as Facebook terms it. You could also message people directly to build up your guild of comrades. Once well known to each other, as with Orkut and MySpace, with your comrades in arms, you could go to their events or invite them to yours.

On Facebook, you can post comments on people’s walls. This is called newsfeed and there is a separate page reserved for newsfeed in your area on this site. This is very somewhat different from blogging or forums, but similar in the sense that you can post your reply to these newsfeeds. Here too, you can, in addition to photos, upload videos. Facebook offers the feature of uploading videos up to 100 MB in size, which can make for videos which would be a bit lengthy with today’s compressed video file formats.

That we guess, is for the book of faces!

## 5.4 Desi Variants

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BigAdda, Fropper and Yaari are the three online social networking services we cover next. BigAdda, as the name suggests, is a site which gives you your own “adda” on the Web. For those not familiar with the term, adda means a hangout—a place where you meet your friends, chill out and have fun. Precisely, the tea stall outside your college, where buddies catch up on some hot and spicy gossip! Yaar means friend, while yaari means friendship. Fropper, we guess is where everyone hops to make friends and connect.

The significant point here is that all three sites are Indian. That is not to say that you cannot interact with people from other countries. People from all over the globe subscribe to these sites. Check out these sites and see for yourself. Moreover, these sites offer as much as international sites in terms of services, if not more. In fact, when we started out research for this chapter, we did not expect these sites to be as popular as Orkut, MySpace or Facebook. What we see, however, is that these sites are as much a rage as international online social networking sites, and offer the same in terms of quality of service as well. You can expect the same promptness you get from Orkut or MySpace or Facebook, from these sites as well. Moreover, these sites have that distinct Indian feel to them, which you will relish once you start using them.

Sign up for any one of these services and you go through the now familiar procedure of receiving an activation link, which you need to click in order to activate your account. Fropper and BigAdda have something called themes for you. This specifies the layout of the pages that you see in your adda in BigAdda and your zone in Fropper—that’s right, your space is called a zone in Fropper. In addition, Fropper has a separate section called relationships. In this section you can meet people and connect with your buddies. In Fropper, you cannot send messages to people unless you create your relationship section within your zone. This also needs to have a different username from your zone username. Fropper, thus, seeks to segregate your space or zone from your friends, which gives you greater privacy on the site.

Once you get to your home page (BigAdda calls the home page a dashboard) on any of these three, you need to once again go through the process of completing the entry of your personal details. Once again on the various pages of the profile, you specify details such as your full name, age, cell number, e-mail ID, address, looks, hobbies, interests, activities you enjoy and the kind of people you are interested in. There is provision for entering information about your school and the college you have attended or are attending. Besides, you can specify your work details such as the nature of your work or the place of work. These details are entered on different pages in these three sites. These sites too offer control over the visibility of certain fields such as age, cell number and address, which users may be sensitive about.

Some people feel this is unnecessary, but there are a whole lot of weird people out there on the online social networking circuit to make this a good feature.

*Be warned: it is not that all is hunky dory on the Web and untoward incidents can happen on these all-so-convenient sites.*

We recommend uploading at least a photo if not a video to catch the interest of people on these sites. When people browse for friends on these sites just as you would, your name shows up along with your photo in the search.

Regarding videos, BigAdda has provision for uploading videos in the latest video file formats, unlike the other networking sites, which request you to upload your files to YouTube and specify a link. As with any online social networking site, you can connect with people on these sites—message them or join groups. As before, you can search for people and mark people who match your search criteria as favourites. Yaari calls such people “hot years”.

This kind of linguistic mixing gives these sites the “desi” feel that we spoke about earlier. Moreover, since the world is becoming a globalized place, there is a trend of people borrowing words from different languages for communicating. This is healthy for cross-cultural interaction.

Fropper, like Yaari, has groups, while BigAdda calls them addas. The word adda in BigAdda parlance, has two meanings—

one, it means the personal space of its subscribers and two, it means the group space for its groups. Similar to international sites, there are all sorts of groups on these sites from technology, to films, to sports, to even literature groups.

On these sites too, you can invite people to events and of course get invited to some as well. There are forums and blogs on these sites too. As with other sites, you can write your views on a particular topic and invite views and opinions from other members on these sites. You can also maintain your blog and invite people to write comments in response to other people's blogs and of course write your own feedback to other peoples' blogs as well. Once again we should exercise caution. Do take what is written on these forums and blogs with a pinch of salt. People often write things in jest on forums and blogs. Do not take these snippets of words so seriously that you begin to lose sleep over them.

Also, in general, avoid writing strong comments in response to peoples' statements on forums and blogs as these can cause a chain reaction and work against you and your pals in the group. The online world offers much in terms of freedom of expression, which is very often abused; especially since people can stay anonymous online.

In addition to these, Yaari offers a unique feature—you can SMS people through Yaari. There is a "Mobile" tab on your home page in Yaari. Click on it and you will see instructions on how to SMS people and allow people to send SMSes to you as well. Fropper, too, has a unique feature to offer. You can chat with people using this site. Fropper has its own online messenger service (only for its members) as part of its relationship zone by means of which you can find out who is online and chat with them just as you would do with Yahoo! or MSN messenger.

## 5.5 Friendster

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Friendster is the next online social networking site in the offering. This offers the advantage of being a multilingual site. This site can also be viewed in languages other than English. The site's home

page says that it is available in English, Spanish and what seem to be languages of the eastern countries.

As usual you start out by signing up for the site. Similar to Facebook, after signing up for this service, you need to follow the usual steps. This has just two, not three. After you enter a few personal details, you can invite your friends to join in, which is step one. Then, upload a photo to the site, which is step two. After completing these two optional steps, you can enter your complete personal details. This is getting a little clichéd, but this is essential to any social networking site. Click on “My Profile” on your home page and you see four tabs. On the main tab you enter your personal details such as age, address, favourite music, movies, hobbies and interests. And, of course, in the college and school tabs you enter details about your college and school. After this you are just about done with your personal details. This site isn’t so detailed in its format about the information you enter in your profile. Also this site doesn’t offer that much in terms of features as say Orkut, MySpace or even Facebook does. It is a rather simplistic site which is good from the point of view that it doesn’t bog a person down with too many details.

After you have filled in your personal details, you are ready to roll! Click on the “My Connections” link to see your list of friends. With this too, you can search for people and socialise and make friends. This site offers an interesting feature—it has its own search engine powered by Google. It provides two options—to search either the Web or Friendster. This service is also useful if you want to search for anything particular on its bulletin board services. That’s correct this site does not offer forums or blogs to write in. It offers bulletin board services (BBSs). BBSs are something the Internet started out with and are similar to the news-feeds feature that Facebook provides. These are basically like a section where people can write their comments like graffiti on the wall and you can view what they have written. You too can write your own graffiti on other people’s walls. On this site you can upload your videos by uploading them to YouTube, Crackle or Metacafe. This is similar to Orkut in that you can upload your videos to YouTube or Google Video.

## 5.6 Hi5

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Hi5 is another social networking site that is multilingual. Apart from oriental languages, this site is available in several European languages such as French, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian and even German.

Start by signing up for this site, and there's no need to go hunting for an activation link. So, just enter a few personal details and you're in. It makes the sign up process simpler and there is provision to prevent spam using the usual technique of asking the subscriber to enter a random sequence of characters just as all the social networking sites do.

Once signed in, click on "My Profile" on your home page to complete the entry of your personal details. This site, like Friendster is very basic in its requirement of personal details, although it does have a few more features in other departments. In your profile, enter your lifestyle, favourite music, hobbies, and schools and you are done. One interesting feature of this site is that you get your own domain name on the Web with this site. This means that if someone named abcxyz signs up for this site he gets a domain by the name <http://abcxyz.hi5.com> with this site and his friends would communicate with him using this domain. This feature is very nifty for people who would like to have their own space on the Web named after them.

This site allows photo uploads and video uploads as well. For uploading videos, Hi5 has tied up with VideoEgg, which is an online video editing service. Similar to Orkut, Hi5 has the feature of scrapbooks. Similar to other social networking sites, you do this after a search for the kind of people you would like to meet. You can send messages to people on the site and can mark your favourite people for later interaction as well. And, of course, you can join a group to meet people who share their interests with you. There is provision to enter your information about your school and college, which can help you find those old friends, forgotten pals or gals (in the right spirit!). The other social networking sites club it with the rest of the profile. Meeting old chums is always a pleasure. And last but not the least, you can maintain



journals on this site. These are very similar to blogs, where you write your experiences of life or just short stories to entertain yourself and others. There are no forums on this site, but the journal does make up for it, or rather, for the lack of it. We would say that this site is somewhat similar to Friendster and has features more basic than other sites, although, it does manage to beat Friendster.

## 5.7 OKCupid

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OkCupid is a very interesting online social networking site that we would like to describe here. Cupid is the name of the Greek god of love, and the name of this site very aptly describes its purpose... This site is more suitable than the other sites described here for people who want to date more than make friends.

OkCupid is different from other sites both in purpose as well as its features. For instance, when you sign up for this site, you are greeted by a lady cartoon character called Inga. Inga first asks you to enter a screen name for yourself and enter your e-mail id. She then requests for further information such as your age and gender, on subsequent pages. Lastly, she asks you to write a short essay on yourself. Do these and you're in. The site does send an activation link, but that doesn't seem mandatory to continue using it. Here, you don't have to enter the plethora of personal details that other sites require you to, so you don't click on the "edit profile" link next (there isn't one anyway). The makers of this site have decided to cater to exclusive clientele—people who want romance in their lives more than friendship. So what you actually do is answer a whole lot of questions related to what you would be looking for in a significant other and also answer if you would expect your match to have a similar or dissimilar answer to those questions. Lastly, you specify what age group of people you are looking for, their "preferences" and their location. Once this is done, the site matches you with other members on the site so that you come to know who among the members your ideal dates are. There is provision to mark your favourite people on this site just like other sites. So, search away and match away.

This site offers another interesting feature—40000 personality tests. Yes! That is what the site claims to offer: “40000 tests to find out your personality type.” We wonder how the makers of the site made time to compile all those tests? These are simple tests such as the “can we date test”, the “can we be friends test” or even the “tough-o-meter test”. There are some really weird ones too like the “spiritual aptitude test” or the “which autobot are you test” or the “Dr. Seuss cat test”. Autobots are robots from the *Transformers* cartoons/movie.

If you want a few laughs, or if you have a lot of time to kill and are simply looking for pure entertainment, do try some of these tests. You will find both, the tests and the results quite amusing. However, the most amusing feature of this site that we found was its sign out line, which said, “Leaving already? We’re sorry to see you go. It’s a big, scary Internet out there. Stop back soon!”

## 5.8 Forums

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Forums are the last online social networking method that we are going to talk about. It’s a method of communications, not a site name. Forums are essentially one of the oldest methods of networking on the Internet. Before online networking sites such as Orkut, Fropper and Friendster existed, this was the most common used way in which people would connect and interact with each other. Sites like Orkut offer more features than forums, stepped into the scene much later.

So what is a forum? A forum is basically a site where you can start a topic for discussion and other users can post replies to the statements which started the forum. Forums are usually named in the format of <http://forum.<sitename>.com> like <http://forums.mysql.com> or <http://<sitename>.com/forum>, such as <http://thinkdigit.com/forum>. People can post replies to the replies as well and this can go on indefinitely. Forums offer a great way for people who want to be heard to speak their hearts out. Nowadays online networking sites like Fropper and MySpace offer their own forums on which members can post replies and voice their opinions. Very often people

are shy to express themselves to others. Forums offer the chance for people to shed their inhibitions and speak up. People do voice their opinions on forums as these sites offer the unique advantage to people to do so without revealing their identity. Since you don't really know who the person who started the topic, or posted a reply is, people can make themselves heard without fear. Hence, as already mentioned, it is wise not to take forums too seriously.

There are forums on every topic on the Internet. There are forums on general topics like movies, music, and entertainment, more specific topics such as politics and environmental issues and also more technical topics such as computers, Internet and electronics. Whatever be the topic, you can simply start a discussion on a forum and set the ball rolling.

In the technical world, people start discussions on technical problems and receive solutions to their replies from others who have encountered the same problem earlier in their lives and have found solutions.

# Software Downloads



**T**here are loads and loads of software out there waiting to be discovered and downloaded. With way too many sites offering them for download, it really is a nitty-gritty task of separating the wheat from the chaff. But hey, that's what we're here for. We have split each site on three lines. The first is What's on offer? Here, you will find information on why you should visit the site. Interface, is a quick review of the same, and Download Test, is a description of how easy (or hard) it is to find and download the software you are looking for. So here we go.

## 6.1 Softpedia

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Softpedia is a name synonymous with downloading. If you don't get it, it is like the encyclopaedia of software. They offer an absolute plethora of services which most people will find helpful. Here goes the list:

### 6.1.1 What's on offer?

**Downloads:** This is a download site... but what a site! They offer everything from software for Windows, Linux, Mac, handheld devices and even mobiles, to the latest drivers as well as the latest gaming files, so that you stay in pace with your clan, if not be the geek yourself! It is really well categorised. They even have a section for iPod tools... now can you beat that! And mind you... all these are updated regularly.

**Reviews:** Softpedia also reviews a lot of stuff. There is nothing like having a trusted review to tell you whether a download is worth it. We went through quite a few reviews and they are all very thorough and comprehensive. In spite of the fact that there is no editor's review, Softpedia enjoys huge fan following that would ensure you know about any software you care to name. They even showcase the latest in handheld devices.

**News:** With frequent updates, Softpedia offers the latest in news. This is value addition in case you get tired of downloading or if your PC gets tired of you downloading!

### 6.1.2 Interface

It seems as if there is more content on the home page than an average page of a dictionary. You get a quick update of the latest in Windows, Mac, Linux, handheld software, games and mobile phones with interesting stuff to read along with the latest news, latest reviews and their top downloads for the past week (try saying that in one breath).

You would go crazy with amount of stuff packed into one little page and is kind of overwhelming to a new user. But once you get used to the interface, you will realise that there are a lot of little touches packed in to help you along. First off all, the "On

this Page” header gives you a quick summary of the contents of that page. This is very useful as there is nothing as agonizing as scrolling down a horrifyingly long page only to realise it has nothing to do with what you want. There is also the cool “Program Finder” (more on that later). It is also possible to sort software by license, but this is rather tiring. Each section has an RSS button



The feature-packed Home Page

and a KLIP button so you can subscribe to it and be updated through your favourite news reader. The title bar also displays how recently that particular section was updated. We loved the download basket which allows you to queue up downloads and download them all in just one go. Kind of like a shopping basket. However, you do need to complete a free registration form to use the download basket. While browsing software, the list displays a very large number of programs on one page with very little information. We would, however, have preferred fewer items, but with more information in a single glance. Although feature packed, it can be a intimidating to the new user. There are also various tidbits scattered around the site such as “This week’s pick” which helps you find cool new software while you are browsing. Though very nifty, this seems to clutter the interface.



The typical download page.

Though very nifty, this seems to clutter the interface. The typical download page consists of basic software information including a rating and an extremely obvious download button. This page is nice and clean and very simple. Whatever ads you see on the site are text ads.

### 6.1.3 The Download Test

The download test was for a freeware Web browser, but not the

usual Firefox or Opera. On the home page, it was pretty obvious the easiest path to follow would be to click on All Download Categories. This brought out a nice and categorised list, where we quickly found browsers under the Internet. Now for the freeware part, on the left there was a category options box that allowed us to filter out anything but freeware. We chose freeware and rating as descending. The top result was a toolbar. Disappointing as it may seem, the second was a browser called K-melon. We clicked the link and were taken to the download page, where we were told it had received a rating of 4.75 from 200+ users. Nice! The extremely obvious download button took us to a download page offering several server options as well as language packs. We chose a server close to India and were good to go! However, we couldn't help getting the feel of too many clicks.

The fact that Softpedia allows you to choose different servers to download from is pretty nifty.

### 6.1.4 Verdict

- ▲ Lots of stuff, well categorised, choice of servers, power-packed UI.
- ▼ Interface intimidating to new users.

Softpedia is easily one of the most comprehensive download sites out there and definitely one to check out. Once you get used to the mildly cluttered interface, this will easily be your best bet to find any software you care to name.

## 6.2 Download.com

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If you need to download something, isn't the most obvious Web site that pops into your head Download.com? This is a sister site of CNET, and is highly reputed among geeks. But is it really the best out there? It wouldn't have the slightest shot at being the best without offering a plethora of services.

### 6.2.1 What's on Offer?

**Downloads:** Download.com offers a wide range of Windows, Mac and Mobile Software, as well as the latest drivers and utilities and of

course the latest game demos and patches. If you haven't noticed, this list is shockingly short as compared to the earlier Softpedia, with the exclusion of Linux software. To add to the injury, the number of drivers available was very short as well, with less than a thousand overall. This is not all that great. What we did like is that they offer a large selection of Web ware as well, which is Software you can run on your Internet browser. Download.com also offers free music downloads. Don't worry it's completely legal and at the time of reviewing they had over 1,00,000 free songs for download. The best part is that all the software on the site is very well categorised into several logical categories. This makes it very easy to browse for the software relevant to what you are looking for. Also, the editors pick out what they think are the best of the best and display them under the editor's picks section for your convenience.

**Reviews:** Download.com also offers several reviews and these are found on the download page itself. Sadly, the reviews were nowhere as comprehensive as we would have liked. It lacked screenshots and were more descriptive than anything else. Luckily, the pros and cons in any software you care to name are brought out by the user base at Download.com. The user reviews are also found on the download page. Though we would have preferred a longer review, it does make sense to have a short review as people really don't consider downloading a rather risky thing. But in case what you are downloading is a 2+ GB mammoth, a full review would surely be appreciated.

**Blog:** The editors of Download.com actually maintain a download blog simply called, "The Download Blog". This is an absolutely fantastic addition as it tells you the latest tech secrets that you need to know. Even if you don't end up visiting Download.com a lot, the Blog is worth visiting.

### 6.2.2 Interface

The interface at Download.com is undoubtedly a lot cleaner than most sites out there, but this comes at the cost of providing less information per page. But this is a great balance and will satisfy both the newest users and hardcore download junkies. The home page is awesome, with your long, collapsible and expandable list



[illegible]

## The Download.com Home Page



A typical download page.

and is surprisingly open and airy. It has a couple of user reviews and a publication date, a more-to-try list that lists similar titles, and a "watch list". This is basically a list of your favourite software for you and your family. Overall, the Download.com website is well updated. Overall, the Download.com website is well updated, offering the perfect balance of information and simplicity.

### 6.2.3 The Download Test

With the interface being as fantastic as it was, we expected to be able to find the test subject pretty easily and were not disappointed. We typed “Web Browsers” into the extremely obvious search bar at the top of the page. Sadly, the results were badly contaminated with software that was not very relevant and even included encryption software. But sorting by category and license led to a list that had only freeware Web browsers. The whole process was a breeze and was very intuitive and easy to pick up.

Even if you did not actually perform a search, finding the software you needed by using the categories is just as easy if not easier.

### 6.3.4 Verdict

- ▲ Interface, blog, music downloads.
- ▼ Exclusion of Linux software, very few driver downloads.

Download.com has what is probably the best interface online, but its relatively small directory of downloads prevents it from becoming number one.

## 6.4 Soft32.com

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Soft32 is the lesser known underdog, overshadowed by Download.com and Softpedia.com when it comes to download sites. However, it aims to be a blend of both that makes it a serious player in the download world. After all, a site that offers as many downloads as Softpedia with the fantastic interface of Download.com would truly be a dream. Sounds good on paper, but how does it all add up in the download-o-sphere?

### 6.4.1 What's On Offer?

**Downloads:** The veritable platter available here. You get Windows, Mac, handheld and Linux software. The game and driver downloads are contained within the Windows downloads section. This is a little confusing, as they really should be occupying different categories all together. Sadly, it does not offer free

music downloads ala Download.com! You will still have to head elsewhere to get your musical fix. There is no Web ware either. The fact that game and driver downloads come under the Windows category gives you the impression that there is a humbly small amount of downloads available in either category, which is certainly not so. Both have a large variety of downloads and you should, in most cases, be able to find what you are looking. Although not an if-it's-been-made-we-have-it scenario, it certainly is more than satisfactory. Categorisation, though present in vast amounts, is slightly confusing and not as intuitive as it should be. Overall-pretty good, not revolutionary or anything, but definitely above average.

**Reviews:** All said, the editor's reviews on this site are what might end up making it your regular download site. The reviews on Soft32 are the perfect length and most importantly the drawbacks and plus points of the software being reviewed are brought out very well. This is a huge value-added feature to the software junkie. Fantastic! The user reviews are there, but due to the fact that Soft32 is one of the lesser known download sites, it's fan base is significantly smaller than Download.com or Softpedia and as a result there are a small number of user reviews available, but the editor's review more than makes up for it.

**News:** Yes, it does offer the latest tech news, served fresh out of the metaphorical oven. Thankfully, the news is nicely classified and you have the option of subscribing to a particular category. This is a nice way to get your daily news update and they are refreshed quite regularly. A nice value-add to an already nice site!

### 6.4.2 Interface

To be truly honest, the interface is like someone took the Softpedia interface and tweaked it. The result is an interface that shows just less information than the Softpedia interface but is at the same time nowhere near as user-friendly as the Download.com interface. If pulled off correctly, this would have been among the best interfaces in the business, but sadly, it isn't! The main page shows the latest and hottest software across all platforms. It also sheds light on the latest tech news and lists out

the download categories available. On the right you have categories and the hottest downloads. On top you get tabs separating the categories. This is a nice touch as new users will appreciate something they are familiar with. Something we appreciated was the inclusion of an “Our picks” section, which is basically a list of hand-picked software the editor considers worthy, as well as an “Essential software” section, which is a list of software your PC needs to keep it up and running. It was nice to see that apart from the editor’s review appearing on the software’s download page, you could also view all the reviews under a separate category. The listing method was great, as the lists featured a plethora of information that includes a screenshot, the license, ratings and a short description. This was actually quite nice because you can show or hide information or screenshots as you may please. The filtering system was again influenced by that used in Download.com. The download page looked very familiar as well, but displayed more information than any other site. Luckily, all this information is well categorised. Overall, Soft32’s interface is very well influenced by its two big brothers, but sadly it is not a very successful blend. Although not too hard, it’s not particularly easy to use either. Something like mid way—maska chaska!



The Soft32 Home Page



The download page

### 6.4.3 The Download Test

Although we initially expected this to be slightly easier than Softpedia and slightly harder than Download.com, we were proved to be totally wrong. The search was shockingly effective and even a basic search threw up a comprehensive list of Web browsers that barely contained anything other than just that. But it all ended there. We were taken aback when we realised that you could not sort your search results by license. So we had no option but to abandon the search and head to the advanced search. The advanced search looks exactly like Google's and this had us looking around for a "Powered by Google" logo, but there wasn't one. The advanced search was as effective as ever, and with the results containing just freeware as specified, we were downloading in no time. Had it not been for the inability of the sorting of search results by license, this would have been an instant winner.

It's a nice feature that you can choose your download server on Soft32 as well.

### 6.4.4 Verdict

- ▲ Interface, editor's reviews, choice of servers.
- ▼ Small user base.

Soft32 could have been one hell of a site. Sadly, it fails at doing so due to its small user base and lack of innovation.

## 6.5 MajorGeeks.com

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The sole aim of most download sites is to be a portal for just about anyone to be able to download—software sans any hassles. Not MajorGeeks! MajorGeeks will certainly give you what you need to keep your system up and running while giving you a healthy dose of techie know-how while you are at it.

Every geek worth his salt is a regular here! That doesn't mean novices are neglected here! They are welcomed just like how a new recruit should be.

### 6.5.1 What's on Offer?

**Downloads:** MajorGeeks really needs to be looked at from a different viewpoint. It is not about providing you with just about any software under the sun. It's more about showcasing software that deserves it. MajorGeeks is dedicated to finding the best software out there and you will rarely find software that is not worth it featured on their download pages. You will find that the number of programs available on any other download site far surpasses that of MajorGeeks, but MajorGeeks really does have all the important software you could need. One section every gamer must check out is the game tweaks section. Though there is not too much of software on MajorGeeks, one visit and you will be downloading stuff and wondering how you ever lived without it!

**Support Forums:** There are lots of extremely helpful tips and tweaks and things you just need to know about scattered around the various forums. One visit to the MajorGeeks forums and you will be hooked will stay there for irrational amounts of time till you mom screams at you! There are lots of helpful people who are willing to answer any questions you might have, from malware removal to overclocking—just remember to ask politely!

**News:** MajorGeeks provides the latest news, tech or otherwise. But this is nothing more than value addition as they aren't updated as frequently. But you should check them out anyway, as they are all interesting articles.

**Geektionary:** The Geektionary is a glossary of all things tech. Ever wondered what WYSIWYG stands for? Or what a Daisy-Chain is? Head over to geektionary to find out! Sadly, this glossary is nowhere near as comprehensive as we would have liked it to be.

### 6.5.2 Interface

MajorGeeks has a unique interface, but that does not mean it's not good. The interface, to be honest, is not too polished. In fact, it is very basic and lacks the neatness of the other sites reviewed. Besides, it has a couple of graphic ads, causing it looking even less elegant. But as most people will agree, it's more about functionality than looks. Functionality is something that this site scores really well as the interface allows easy access to the various soft-

were contained within. Sadly, there is no search option other than a standard Google-powered one. The main page is totally unique, adopting a more blog-esque interface with the day's updates and news being posted in reverse chronological order. This change is indeed welcome, especially if you are a regular here. To the left are all the categories, in plain simple text. No collapsible menus or tabs here. To your right are a lot of useful links that should be read on your first visit. You keep getting the feel that the site is run by two extremely geeky brothers sitting locked up in their room, which is in fact true. The site is indeed owned and maintained by two guys who refer to themselves simply as Tim and Jim. On the top are useful links as well. The lists are again drop-dead

simple but informative. The download page itself consists of a short description. There are no editor reviews though. While this would have been an interesting addition, you can be rest assured that if a program is featured on MajorGeeks, it's worth checking out. There is of course, the ever useful user rating and considering the volume and type of users that visit MajorGeeks, this almost makes up for it!

### 6.5.3 The Download Test

We assumed that with the super-simple interface this would be an easy task, and were totally right. A click on Browsers in the left pane took us to a page listing browsers and other tools connected to them. The "Sort By License" link gave us an updated list with freeware on top. We picked one on the list and were good to go. Though this was quite easily the simplest procedure ever, it does



Home of the Geeks



The download page

not give you results that are very refined, as along with the browsers, we were looking at plugins, add-ons and what not! Still, it was quite commendable. However, we must remind you that if the software you are looking for fits into more than one category, it can be quite troublesome to find it due to the lack of a dedicated search. But you could always run that custom Google search.

There is also a decent number of servers to download from (usually four or more) and these are well spread out.

#### 6.5.4 Verdict

- ▲ Unique, Great source for gyaan, awesome support forums, easy to use UI, good choice of servers, Very useful software features.
- ▼ Interface not polished, less number of software.

MajorGeeks is easily one of the best sites out there to find some new software, as it has done the segregation for you. Do visit this site once. It is a great source of knowledge and the forums will be more than helpful.

## 6.6 Brothersoft.com

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Brothersoft is again, like soft32 an underdog when compared to Download.com and Softpedia, but with a text-driven interface that's clean and easy to use and a huge directory of downloads (six times that of soft32's) they are hoping to be more successful than soft32.

### 6.6.1 What's on Offer?

Here we go again:

**Downloads:** As mentioned before, Brothersoft claims to have a download directory 6 times that of soft32's, so one might assume that they have downloads from every category under the sun. Sadly, what Brothersoft does is actually just focus on Windows software. We were kind of shocked when we saw that there was no Mac, Linux or handheld software, nor were there game patches



and updates. The games section provides a list of arcade-style games available to buy, no *Call of Duty 2* or *Crysis* here, just 3D Pacman. But, looking at this in a positive light, this means that they have 60,000 Windows-only downloads. This is enough to make most hardcore Microsoft lovers faint. When it comes to Windows software, if you need it, chances are Brothersoft will have it. But a little incident left us shell-shocked and battered. We wanted to see the range of drivers they offered and clicking on drivers instantly took us to another site, which asked payment to download drivers! This led to a frenzy in which we went back to the Brothersoft homepage and clicked on around twenty links to see if they were authentic. Luckily they were. But if this is how Brothersoft claims to have 60,000 downloads, it's suddenly not that impressive anymore.

**Reviews:** This should actually have been in the "What should have been there but is not" section, but since there is no such section, we thought we might as well put it here to bring it to your attention. There are no reviews on this site. No reviews, whatsoever. Not by the editor, not by users, nothing. All you get is a description. This is something shocking, as it renders the site useless for browsing software. It seems that Brothersoft does not even try to be a site where you can surf through a lot of downloads for cool new software but instead just come to download software you know about.

This brings us to a rather abrupt ending, because downloads is all that Brothersoft has to offer. No news, no support forums, nothing extra really! In a way this may be good, because that means the editors have more time to focus on downloads.

### 6.6.2 Interface

The interface is clean and easy to look at. It is by no means garish or over-crowded. It is very easy for a beginner to get used to, especially, due to the usage of text. Ironically, there are quite a few graphic ads present. On the home page, you get two of the editor's picks, taking up unnecessary prominence. To the left you have this plethora of categories that they offer downloads for, all in plain simple text. Scattered all over the page are rec-

ommended programs. This makes it really tough to figure out if these were really editor recommended programs, or just advertising. This is quite misleading. Moving over to the listing methodology, the lists need some finer polishing to get the license, description and the size. Not really all that bad, because it does provide useful information at a glance. Sadly, you can only filter lists by downloads, date and license. The download page itself seemed useless due to the lack of editor's review or even a user rating. They provide a single screenshot of the software, though, and a more elaborate description with details. Something that was appreciated was a list of software by the same publisher. This was actually quite a nice touch. All over the site, the "Most-searched" box is visible that shows you the most-searched-for software. The search function though, is a bit weird. If you conduct a search, it opens a new window with the results. The new window has a completely different interface that looks like it was updated a couple of years ago. There really is no excuse for this. Overall, the interface was quite simple to use, but with very few frills and a few major caveats.

### 6.6.3 The Download Test

Considering the fact that the entire interface was text-based, we expected this to be fool-proof. Luckily, Brothersoft finally had a breakthrough here. It took us all of ten seconds to get a list of freeware Web browsers from which we picked one and were downloading in no time. This was one of the smoothest process-



The Brothersoft home page



The download page

es we have come across but without a single review in sight, it was like taking shots in the dark.

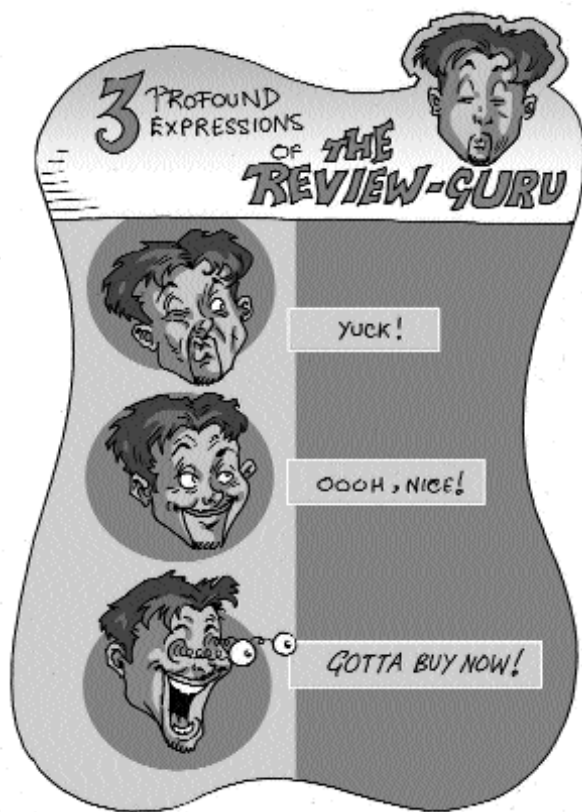
The search function, though irritating with the new window and what not, was surprisingly accurate. If only this accuracy was implemented better!

### **Verdict**

- ▲ Easy to use interface, large number of Windows software downloads.
- ▼ Nothing other than Windows software, search implemented badly, drivers, no reviews.

Brothersoft really has a long way to go if it wants to get to the top—a longer way than any of the sites listed here, anyway. But it still is a commendable source for Windows software downloads.

# Reviews



The Internet can be your guide to just about anything as long as you know where to go... The sites we will talk about in this chapter review the myriad hardware and software products that exist in the technology world. They separate the good from the bad, all for your convenience and satisfaction and for free! This chapter will point you to the right places on the WWW to help you spend your money wisely.

## 7.1 Software Reviews

### 7.1.1 FreewareGenius.com

This is a slight detachment from the trend because FreewareGenius is not a site, it's a blog! This amazing contribution to the free movement is a personal blog maintained by a single person. If this does not inspire you enough to visit it, we don't know what will. The whole point of this site is to prove to everyone that the usability and features of the best freeware can surpass even paid software. The author hand-picks the very best freeware, personally tests it, and then posts a review. Needless to say, these are some of the best reviews on the Web.

The author's been posting since October 2006, and is still going strong. You can't actually download anything from the site, but download links are provided. The author says in his FAQ that only the best software gets featured on the blog, and we found this to be quite true as we browsed



The revolution that is FreewareGenius

through what the blog had to offer. Some of the most incredible freeware on the Web is to be found among these pages. However, one must consider the fact that this is indeed a blog, and as a result will have two caveats. It will not be updated nearly as frequently as a full-blown Web site. It is updated about once in 2-3 days. But hey, good things come to those who wait, and it's not like you have to keep checking back on the site, you could just subscribe to the RSS feed and you're good to go.

Also, the interface is a bit tough to manoeuvre, but a blog is not meant to be used like a regular Web site—you're supposed to go through the posts one by one, and this holds true here as well, there are over 25 pages for you to go through, and we guarantee

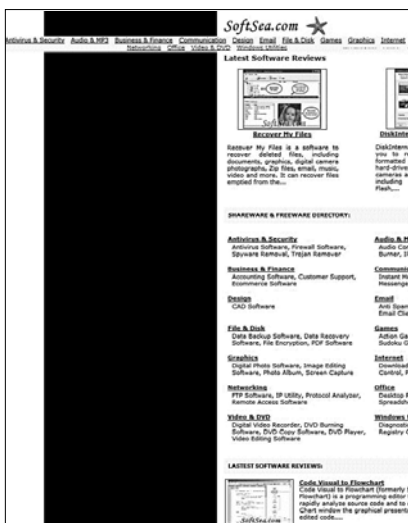
that you will download at least one freeware from each page. So get reading. Assuming that you are in no mood to sort through 25+ pages, the posts are luckily well categorized, and any category is easily accessible. So if you need that freeware image editor or that free database software, don't sweat it. Besides the categorisation, you can always run the Google powered search. Finally if you are in a tearing hurry, you can just check out the Top 20 list—we guarantee that you will not be able to resist downloading a few of these!

We just wanted to mention that the author does accept user-submitted reviews, so you can have your say as well.

### 7.1.2 SoftSea.com

It really is a sea of software out there, and the good people at SoftSea understand that, hence their name. Softsea is one of the best software reviews Web sites out there, and they also offer the software they review for download. It is updated quite regularly, and one visit will keep you coming back for more.

The interface lacks eye-candy, and looks pretty unfinished. In fact we even tried using different browsers just in case it was due to browser incompatibility, but no luck. It is still very usable though. The main page is, like the rest of the site, rather bland and boring, but usable. All the categories and the latest software reviews are listed out. We should warn you that the site is ad-heavy, so keep your trusty freeware ad-blocker ready. The lists throughout the site make browsing through the software list really easy—you get a rating and even a screenshot. In fact, the whole site is nicely



SoftSea's minimal interface

peppered with screenshots of every application reviewed. Head over to the download page to get your hands on said software. Software is also classified into well thought out categories to make life really easy for you.

The site offers not just freeware reviews, but even shareware reviews. It is as a matter of fact one of the very few sites that stretch beyond freeware reviews. Software is accompanied by a rating out of five stars and anything that gets four stars and above is really worth the download. We went through quite a few reviews and found them to be of sufficient length and detail. They do bring out the pros and cons of the software in question; unlike several sites whose reviews are just descriptions of the software.

Definitely one more site to add to your “must-visit” list.

### 7.1.3 LifeHacker.com

Don't be intimidated by the garish title, this site is not about hacking at all. In fact, it is one of the most informative sites on the Internet. LifeHacker handles more than just reviews, though, and is more of a technology lifestyle site... err... blog. Well, it's either a site designed to look like a blog, or a collective blog of technology writers that are employed by LH. Updates are frequent, thanks to the multiple bloggers, and you will typically find between 10 and 30 new posts a day.

A lot of these posts span the entire gamut of technology, and are not “software reviews”, which is what we were interested in finding. Just head over to the “Windows” section and then to the “Downloads” section, and you will find your software reviews. We should tell you that LH is better suited for those who like to stumble across great software while surfing, and not really for the “I-want-a-review-of-so-and-so-software” surfer.



LifeHacker, a collective blog

The interface is surprisingly nice for a blog, and is a lot easier to navigate than, say, FreewareGenius—which is probably thanks to the bigger team that works for LH.

All the reviews are superbly written and leave little to imagination. The good and the bad are brought out pretty well, but not as well as say, FreewareGenius. Overall, a fantastic site to visit if you're a tech junkie, but it can't beat FreewareGenius in terms of software reviews.

#### **7.1.4 Freeware Wiki**

<http://freewarewiki.com/FreewareReviews>

The above is a direct link to a huge number of Software reviews that you should definitely check out. It is a long list, and is mainly freeware. The entire list is all text based so it is extremely easy to just call up your browser's search function and see if what you are looking for is present. There is no categorization to speak of though, so this does make browsing through reviews really tough. You should know that this is a hand-picked list, so the reviews are very short and mainly descriptive. But if software is present here, chances are you will like it. Definitely, one to bookmark.

## **7.2 Hardware Reviews**

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#### **7.2.1 Tom's Hardware**

[www.tomshardware.com](http://www.tomshardware.com)

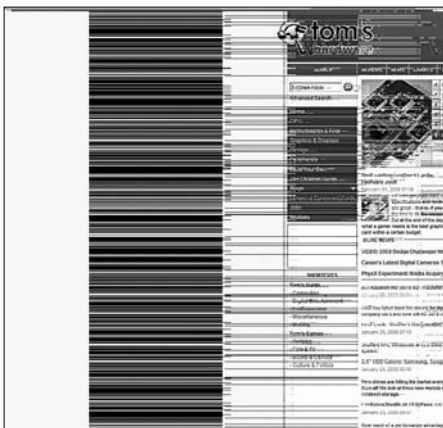
For many years now, Tom's Hardware has been one of the most trusted hardware review sites on the Net. Geeks and technophobes alike consider anything that is published on Tom's Hardware as Gospel truth. It isn't just reviews that are published here though—you get comparison charts, tech tips and the latest news about hardware launches.

However, there is a twist in the tale. Tom's hardware is not your typical review site where a single device is the focus of attention and all the negative and positive aspects are covered. (If you are looking for a site like that, it's up next) The "reviews" on Tom's Hardware are actually articles that select the best of



the best from each category and tell you why it is the best. This makes a lot of sense really, because what you are doing by reading different reviews is comparing products and Tom's Hardware does just that for you.

The biggest caveat of Tom's Hardware is that the site focuses mainly on PCs and PC hardware, and rarely



Tom's Hardware

extends into gadgets and mobile phones—which is what a lot of us are looking for. That said, if you're the type who wants to know what the performance gains of the new 45nms are, or if the new AMD chips can oust Intel, look no further.

The interface looks great while being perfectly functional. The home page is a quick summary of everything the site has to offer and is enough to hook you on to it. The ads are relatively non-intrusive—always a good thing. Whatever Tom's Hardware does, it does with aplomb. All the articles are fantastically written and great care is taken to ensure identical test conditions. Their whole testing methodology is laid out in an article for your perusal.

Results are well displayed with a heavy use of graphs and charts. Tom's Hardware is not just about making good buying decisions; it is also about getting the most out of hardware you already own. But that is a topic for another Fast Track all together.

If you're an overclocker, you will love Tom's Hardware, and also remember to check out their forums—a treasure trove of information for hardware fanatics. In conclusion: the best site there is for performance-hungry geeks looking for information on the latest hardware.

## 7.2.2 CNET.com

CNET is probably the most well-known review site in the world. It offers so much more than reviews, though, and if we started listing out all it offers, we'll waste quite a few pages of this book. The solution is simple really, just type in [www.cnet.com](http://www.cnet.com) into your browser and let yourself be dazzled by the sheer volumes of information that is available in categories such as—tech news, blogs, interesting articles, CNET TV, etc.

Reviews are, obviously, the prime focus on CNET, and almost all products have a video review—which is short: to give you an idea of what the product looks and feels like—and a long, well-detailed text review to tell everything you need to know about the product. The reviews are well-written, and bring out all the pros and cons of the hardware in question. CNET scores on a scale of 10, so anything that's rated 8 and above should be a spectacular product—CNET has really high standards.

As we mentioned earlier, Tom's Hardware is all about PC components... CNET is all about everything else. It focuses on gadgets and stand-alone devices such as cell phones, MP3 players and HDTVs. CNET has several sister sites—CNET Asia, CNET UK and CNET Australia, to give you content that's relevant to your area. CNET Asia is well known for its Mobile Phone reviews.

The CNET interface is top-of-the-line, and you *know* when you're browsing through the site that it was well planned and expensive to build! The interface is the perfect balance of eye-candy, and usability. Make sure you check out the blogs once you are done reading the reviews. There are several blogs like The Audiophiliac, an audio-oriented blog which is maintained by Donald Bell, one of CNET's senior editors. These blogs are great sources for in-depth information on any particular subject. Another must-visit.



The CNET Home Page.

### 7.2.3 Ars Technica

#### ArsTechnica.com

Ars Technica (AT) adds a little bit of humour into everything they do. Sometimes we wonder if they have comedy script writers inject humour into every review, and their articles are guaranteed to elicit a giggle or four.

AT is not specifically a review site. There, we've said it. However the supreme quality of the reviews that are available make it worthy of a mention. The site offers a bevy of interesting articles that are in some way related to tech. Since they are not an exclusive review site, you will only find



Ars Technica in all it's glory.

reviews of popular products. You can get to the hardware reviews by clicking on the "Articles" link at the top of the home page, and then choose the "Hardware reviews" category from that page.

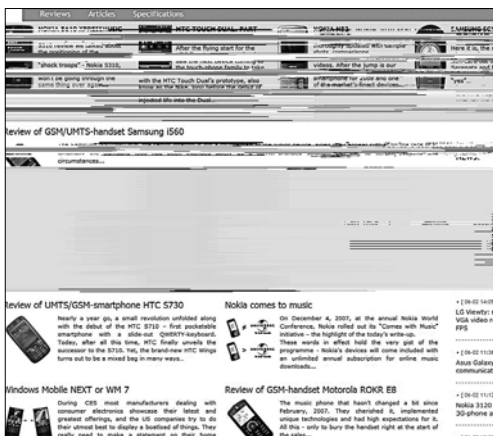
The layout of articles is excellent, and usability is a snap. AT also goes above and beyond most other sites in they way they test by conducting (extreme) "stress tests" and even taking hardware apart to reveal the innards. So if you want to know if an iPod Shuffle can be dropped from a third-floor balcony, be dunked in a beer mug, and still play back your favourite drinking songs, this is the site to find it all out at. For those who want to know right away, the iPod Shuffle survived the test!

One little caveat: you don't get the overall rating on the first page of a review, and you will have to navigate to the last page of a review to get that all important final score. Finding a review is made

simple by using the well integrated search feature. Apart from this, the site's quite an interesting read, and another worthy bookmark.

## 7.2.4 Mobile-Review.com

As soon as you get to the site you will be scratching your head trying to figure out all the gibberish—unless you can read Russian. Right at the top of the page, look for the English link. You will be taken to a slightly less featured, slimmed down, English version of the site. It's still one of the



The home page.

most comprehensive mobile review sites out there. Though it's called "Mobile-Review" the site also reviews PDAs and MP3 players, though nowhere near in as big a number as cell phones.

A quick click on the "Handsets" link on the left will take you to a page that contains links to reviews of what seems like every phone model ever manufactured—probably a lot better, but suffice to say that there are enough handset models to dissuade you from trying to keep count.

With this many reviews, you'd expect the reviews to be short and sweet—no way! The reviews are exhaustive, and every detail you can think of is covered for each handset model. A warning for those on slower pipes: every review is peppered with a dangerous amount of pictures, with shots of the product from every conceivable angle. You can also view or download pictures and videos that were shot using all phone that have camera capabilities—all uncompressed and untouched-up, so you know the quality of the camera on the phone model.

The interface isn't exactly ideal, but those of you who love details will not give a hoot. Bookmark this site if you every plan on upgrading your phone.

## 7.3 Game Reviews

### 7.3.1 Gamespot.com

This is yet another site from the CNET camp that has revolutionised its field. It is pretty much a unanimous choice for gamers. It offers a lot more than just game reviews, but it's the reviews that it's most famous for. Still, apart from the best cadre of reviews, you can find previews, news, cheats, downloads, interviews and more.

You can sign up and take part in the HotSpot feature, which is actually a live audio show for users like yourself to take part in. There are podcasts, a SoapBox for rants and arguments and even more features for those of you willing to pay for a premium membership.

Getting back to the reviews, we strongly urge that you sign up here if you're even remotely interested in gaming. Although reading reviews doesn't require it, a sign up will allow you to leave comments, submit your own short reviews for games, track your favourite games and even write in the blog that comes with your account. You also gain full access to the well-populated forums to discuss the most specific strategies and tactics with fellow gamers.

The reviews are in-depth, well written and peppered with pictures. Gamespot recently revamped their Pros and Cons methodology and apart from just telling you the ups and downs of a game, they also award medals if a game excels in a particular area. Like



The clean yet informative home page.

there is a medal for outstanding graphics, one for outstanding gameplay and an “Oh Snap” medal which is for games which have unexpected yet delighting moments. Overall, it is great fun to read reviews on Gamespot, and also very informative. Most games have a video review, so that you can actually get a feel for the game yourself as well.

The entire experience is enhanced by a top-notch interface that's well designed for gamers. You can browse through the games by selecting genres and platforms, thus making it easy to find games that interest you. The search function is good, and even the search results are separated into categories. Of course, being such a popular site means that you're bombarded with advertisements, but it's nothing a good Flash ad-blocker cannot handle. Overall, Gamespot is arguably the best site to spend your time on for a game review or two.

### 7.3.2 IGN.com

There really never is a monopoly in any field is there? Microsoft has Apple, Intel has AMD, and Nokia has Sony Ericsson. Similarly, Gamespot has IGN; a site that takes away some of Gamespot's thunder. For us gamers, it's really tough to make a call and say which one is really better, but thankfully, you don't have to choose—just get the best of both worlds.

IGN offers a plethora of features through mini-Web sites called channels. This sounds harrowing conjuring up images of a dangerous number of tabs, but don't worry, it works really well. Coming back to what they offer, it is a huge range of features. It seems like IGN reviews everything, for on their main page you will see reviews of Games, DVDs, movies, TV shows, Anime, Music, Comics and even the odd MP3 player. And it's not just reviews—you can even find features, previews, photos, videos, podcasts, cheats, guides, FAQs and the latest news. That is a lot of stuff, and just browsing through the different categories should keep even the speediest surfer occupied for quite a while.

Reviews are fantastic, and rival Gamespot's reviews well. Each review is exhaustive, and often runs into several pages. However, instead of listing the pos and cons up front, IGN opts

for the “wait-till-the-last-page” way, which can be quite painful. Signing up for an account will get you more in terms of features, but if it’s only reading reviews that you crave, you can skip this. The one-time procedure is a snap though, so sign-up if you have 30 seconds to spare.

The interface (mini-channels and all) works surprisingly well, and is perfectly navigable.

Filtering out the information is simple and easy, and it’s easy to find reviews for games that you might like—all nicely sorted by platform and genre. Like Gamespot, IGN is ad-heavy, and it’s time to whip out your ad-blocker, pepper spray. We’ll leave it to you to decide whether IGN is really better than Gamespot or not, because we just can’t seem to get enough of either.



Stealing Gamespot's thunder?

### 7.3.3 GameRankings.com

We expect everything to be served up on a platter these days, and why not? The customer is king after all. So if you don't consider yourself a “gamer”, or if you're just too lazy to care, hunting for game reviews based on genre and platform may just be a little too much work. That's where GameRankings (GR) comes in. Think of it as a no-nonsense way of choosing the next game to buy. Let GR do all the dirty work, review all the games out there and just take their word for it when they make suggestions...

GameRankings does not review games itself, but instead, collects reviews from a lot of other sites, analyses the ratings a game got and then comes up with its own percentage score. So basically, GR is a site made by the lazy, for the lazy and of the lazy—no that's not their tag-line, we're just making stuff up.

Here's how it works: when a game is released, it doesn't show up immediately on GR. A game only qualifies for a GR score if it's been reviewed and rated on 20 or more of the most popular gam-

ing sites. Once that's done, GR takes the scores that the game got, uses some really complex algorithms (or at least we hope they do) and comes up with a percentage score and ranks the game. This way, you're sure to find games that are big enough to be reviewed by the majority of the gaming world, and you get the general feel of how good the game is even before you buy it. No more biased reviews, no more reading rather large reviews to decide on a game.

GR is not just about ranking based on noteworthy gaming sites, and it also allows you to see which games its users voted for. All you need to do is look at the average review rating and also the user rating to decide whether the game is good or not.

The GR interface is surprisingly functional, and even though you'd think of it as being rather cluttered, the home page is so simple, you'll be wondering if you're at the wrong site. The filtering is also achieved quite well, and you will find that the plethora of filters that are at your disposal makes searching feel like overkill—though at least you will find better search results. You can sort by platform, category, ESRB rating, the date and of course, by the rating. Once you click on a game in a list, you're taken to a page that contains details of the reviews, their sources and the various ratings that the game was awarded. If you want to read a particular gaming site's review, all you need to do is click on the appropriate link. Game listings also include fan sites, and other sources for cheats and tips. Again, GR is ad-heavy, but you've come to expect that already, haven't you?

The Game Rankings Home page.



# Tech Help



**W**ell... what exactly constitutes tech help? Popularly, the most obvious interpretation of tech help is to find a solution for any of the following situations: buying, using and disposing. Users involved with tech help can be classified into: Neos (those who seek information) and Pros (those who share information). And we're here to help these two find each other.

## 8.1 Buying

### 8.1.1 Product Reviews

Sites with tech-product reviews have been covered in the previous chapter. It is worth noting that the information on these sites has a one-dimensional, one-directional aspect to it. The site is generally supplied with the products to be tested and their reviews are based on the performance of the product during a brief testing period. The single dimension here is performance. The long term user, which is what most buyers are, is not represented in the whole process.

Additionally, the flow of information is unidirectional, since the user can only passively read the information without being able to ask questions. Nonetheless, these sites are great places to find comparative information across brands of the same product type.

Only a long term user can describe absolute usage experience of the product. For a valid and healthy discussion, one needs to look at forums. To find usage reviews, head to one of the following sites:

#### Mouthshut.com

Probably the only one of its kind in India, the importance of this site in shaping purchase decisions is at par with that of the review sites. While performance is a good yardstick to choose a better product, the total user experience is also influenced by other aspects such as ease of availability, product ruggedness, prompt support and warranty issues. Such information can only be shared by Pros with the experience of buying and using the product.

While the site boasts of a healthy coverage of many products, it seriously lags when it comes to PC components. More Pros need to share their views on



Get the straight dope at Mouthshut.com

the products they have used for Neos to benefit. Also, the site accommodates Neo requests seeking reviews on certain products.

This site is ad enriched and some of them intrude into the reading area as well. Fortunately, most of the ads are text based.

### **Thinkdigit.com/forum/**

The review section in the forum offers many user-written products reviews. With over 6,700 relevant reviews, this is the largest Indian user-review repository available online. Neos can also request for reviews, which Pros can address.

We're not going to dwell on it for long because it's Digit's site, but we had to mention it for lack of any other technology-biased communities in India.

## **e-tailer Sites**

Many e-tailer sites based abroad have a customer review section associated with each product. They are great places to find user reviews. Some popular e-tailer sites are [ciao.co.uk](http://ciao.co.uk), [reviews.ebay.com](http://reviews.ebay.com), [reviews.ebay.co.uk](http://reviews.ebay.co.uk), [newegg.com](http://newegg.com), [amazon.com](http://amazon.com), [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk), [reviews.pricegrabber.co.uk](http://reviews.pricegrabber.co.uk), [comparestoreprices.co.uk](http://comparestoreprices.co.uk) and [shopping.yahoo.com](http://shopping.yahoo.com). The respective domains provide country-specific content.

It is rather strange that Indian e-tailer sites, notably [ebay.in](http://ebay.in) (unlike its UK and US sites), does not have a product review section, although many offer a seller review.

With regards to non-Indian sites, while the information about the dealer may not be useful, the information regarding the usage of the product is relevant.

## **Other Indian Sites**

Other Indian tech sites that have a dedicated Review section or subforum are [techtree.com](http://techtree.com), [techenclave.com/forums/](http://techenclave.com/forums/), and [forums.techarena.in](http://forums.techarena.in). These are places where Pros can voluntarily post their user experiences to benefit Neos.

### **8.1.2 Price Related Information**

To check if the local dealer is not overcharging, Neos can visit any of these sites to find benchmarks.

### Computerwarehousepricelist.com

Maintained by a dealer in Bangalore, the user can browse the site and check for prices (and also place an order) or simply download the pricelist which the creators have



Indicative prices for Bengaluru

thoughtfully made available. The link to download the pricelist is on the first page itself. This is an MS Excel spreadsheet which has an extensive listing of the prices of products carried by the shop. For those who would like to track prices, it is a good exercise to revisit the site regularly, download updated pricelists and compare them.

### theitwares.com

A Mumbai-based site, this has a multi-page, well categorised and extensive price listing of the products it carries. For some inexplicable reason, it also stuffs the pages with ads of other shops selling IT goods. Harakiri or what?



TheITWares offers indicative Mumbai pricing

### npithub.com

Nehru Place, the IT hub in New Delhi has this community Web site to represent all the dealers in that area. This site is also ad filled, but most of



...and the Delhi version is NP IT hub

the ads are those of the dealers who have presence on the Web site. The Download Pricelist link is in the left side bar and a user registration is needed to access it. Compared to the other pricelists mentioned already, the npithub price list can seem haphazard-it is a consolidated listing of the prices of all the shops on the site, sorted shopwise.

### Computers.ebay.in

If none of the previous sites satisfy the need to have a rough estimate of current product prices, give ebay.in a glance. The interface is too bulky, and prices are mostly on the higher side. But, if your requirement is that esoteric, there would not be a better place to find it than on ebay.in. This site is suitable especially for finding second hand goods or the indicative prices thereof.

### Other Sites

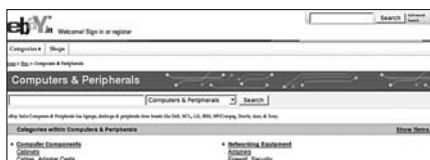
#### deltapage.com

This site belongs to a shop in Chennai. This one page wonder display the prices on the page itself, with minimal fuss and bloat. The product range is comparatively limited though.

#### Priceguru.in

With a name that sounds so inviting, it would seem to be the first place to head, but the site is not as regularly updated as the others already mentioned.

Most etailers such as shopping.rediff.com, indiaplaza.in and shopping.indiatimes.com have a computer section that you can use.



Using eBay to get approximate prices

## 8.2 Using

### 8.2.1 Tech Problems

There are many places to find information to solve a tech issue.

#### Search Engine

For Neos, the first and best course of action to get prompt tech advice is to do some searching. It is possible that the question has already been asked by someone on some forum or site and a quick search will reveal the answer faster than a direct reply by a Pro.

## Tech Help Sites

Another alternative is to visit tech help sites and forums and post the problem. A tech support site without a forum is hard to come across. Unlike manufacturers with a dedicated (and paid) team to answer user queries, forums leverage the knowledge pool existing in its user base for answers. It is the community spirit all along the members that drive a forum.

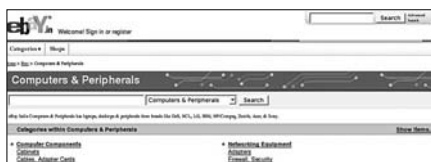
It needs to be noted that there are Web sites dedicated to problem solving. Besides, there are tech review Web sites that do not primarily focus on tech support, but also have a forum where tech savvy people can offer suggestions to resolve similar problems faced by other users. Being a popular destination for technophiles, a forum is a natural extension to such sites. For the purposes of this chapter, we shall not make a distinction between these two types of sites.

## Identifying a “proper” forum

To promptly identify forums offering relevant solutions, one needs to look for clues such as the number of members, number of questions, number of topic categories and age of the forum.

The more the members, the better is the chance that you will get a better and quicker answer. But, if the site is old, the member strength could be misleading.

The number of queries/posts is a good indicator of the depth of the site. The larger the number, the greater the answer database and bet-



Screenshot 5 : Computers.ebay.in.jpg

ter the chance of finding a similar question answered previously.

The “weightage” of the subforums in a site is also an indicator of where the strength of the forum lies. A “tech” forum having the highest number of posts in a casual chat section is probably not the best place to expect a relevant answer to a tech problem. Sites that are spread too wide also can hide deficiencies—seeking an answer for a problem in C++ at a site with 90 per cent

of its queries under the hardware section has poor chances of eliciting a response.

Another good clue is the language in use. If you see too many SMS-style answers, you know you are dealing with bubblegum-chewing teens who may be incapable of understanding your problem properly, unless you are one yourself! They may answer your question, but besides the headache that will result from trying to figure out what is being conveyed, after decrypting the code you will realise that the answer is too irrelevant!

### Newsgroups

The last alternative to get tech help is to head to Newsgroups. Since it is hard to come across a forum that does not display ads, those put off by ads have no other option. A newsgroup user tends to be more mature and hence experienced in their field of activity, which is reflected in the answers. However, replies usually take more time than forums (which is why it is the last alternative).

While a newsgroup that serves a subject may be available, whether it has a sizeable number of queries or whether the members are active, are factors that need to be considered. The post count is a good indicator, but to find more information it is best to use online newsgroup reading sites such as **groups.google.com**. Unlike newsgroup reader software (discussed in the previous issue of FT), which can only display the messages on the server, **groups.google.com** also provides access to archived posts no longer available on the newsgroup server. It also reveals the number of members and the total number of messages available, besides a rating of the level of activity. The last parameter is a good indicator of how

#### Dealing with Ads

Ads are a necessary evil. When you expect the site to offer good quality answers for free, the least you can do to thank them, is to allow the ads to be displayed. It somehow seems the morally right thing to do. While most sites rely of text ads, some sites will load massive flash ads that besides using up bandwidth also intrude the process of reading the message. It is upto the user to decide which types of ads to allow and which to block.

long it would take for a reply to be forthcoming. Low activity newsgroups are not the best places to expect a prompt response.

### 8.2.2 The Sites

Next, we shall look at some notable tech help sites.

## Official Sites

If the question is product specific and if the product is in warranty, it is better to approach the manufacturer directly for assistance. Most manufacturers have a customer support crew to handle such queries. For manufacturer-specific tech help, visit the home page and search for any link labelled “Support”. Almost all hardware and software manufacturers with a Web site include a forum, where users can exchange views. Please note, this does not refer to the official support Web sites where the company’s support team answers queries.

Major software vendors such as Microsoft (e.g., Visual Studio), Sun (e.g., Java), Oracle (e.g., Oracle RDBMS) and Adobe (e.g., Photoshop) have their own support forums at [forums.microsoft.com](http://forums.microsoft.com), [forum.java.sun.com](http://forum.java.sun.com), [forums.oracle.com](http://forums.oracle.com), [adobeforums.com](http://adobeforums.com), respectively. Hardware manufacturers such as ASUS, NVIDIA, and Apple also have their own forums at [vip.asus.com/forum/](http://vip.asus.com/forum/), [forums.nvidia.com](http://forums.nvidia.com), [discussions.apple.com](http://discussions.apple.com), respectively.

**Techguy.org (helponte.net)**

Numbers speak loudest—6,44,000+ posts under the hardware sub forum and 6,94,00+ posts under Windows OS sub forum. There are quite a few ads, but most of them are text based. Besides these two sub forums, there are others that cater to Malware/Spyware removal (7,50,000 posts), General Software, Linux/Unix and Games. The fall out for this site is the comparatively limited posts in the non-Windows OS and software development sub forums. However, at



## The Tech Support Guy!



30,000+ posts in each page, it still is more than what is seen in other dedicated forums.

Each page has 3-4 ads, but none of them show up in the middle of the message.

### Tomshardware.com/forum/

Besides being a popular tech review site, Tomshardware.com also has a very active forum, with sub groups spanning the entire gamut of topics covered by the site. Each sub group is well stocked with queries and replies. A cursory sampling of the queries and answers show that the answers



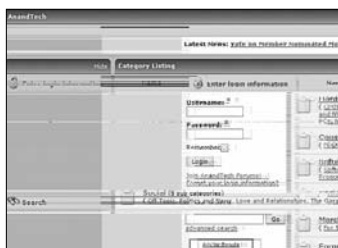
Tom's Hardware has an active forum

are prompt. As expected, the most popular sub forums are hardware related—with the CPU sub forum weighing in with 6,15,000+ posts. Other popular subforums are Graphics and Displays (4,50,000+ posts) and Motherboards and Memory (3,00,000+ posts). There are software related sub forums as well, with the Windows XP sub forum being the most populous with 3,85,000+ posts and the Games sub forum having 5,00,000+ posts.

The ad content is a bit on the heavy side, but this seems to be the case with most sites in this genre.

### Forums.anandtech.com

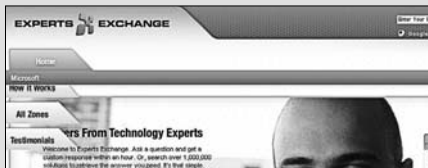
This site is similar to tomshardware.com in most areas. The most apparent difference, however, is the number of ads, with fewer making an appearance here. Though total posts figures are not available, the number of queries



The Anand Tech Forum

## www.Experts-exchange.com

This used to be a free service, with experts being awarded points and ranks for answering questions. Probably, the quality and promptness of the answers were so



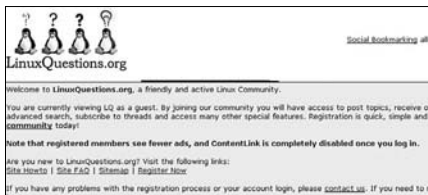
good that the promoters of the site stopped offering the service gratis and began charging users for access to the answer database. While the site will turn up in Google search results, the user is usually led to a page where the query is listed, along with statistics on the number of people who found the answer useful. The answer in all cases will be withheld.

So, if none of the free solutions offered by the other sites seem to work for you, [www.experts-exchange.com](http://www.experts-exchange.com) may offer the ray of hope, at a cost.

are listed and they serve just as well as an indicator of the forum's activity. Software finds no mention on this forum. Most of the queries are asked in the General Hardware subforum (91000+ queries) and the Video Cards and Graphics subforum (42000+ queries).

## LinuxQuestions.org

Most forums offer Linux as a sub forum and all Linux distro creators have a forum of their own. But, if there is one forum that towers over all the rest it is LinuxQuestions.org. With



close to 3 million posts on Linux, Linux and more Linux, there is no better place to find answers to Linux queries. It also has sub forums dedicated to other Unix-based OSes. Ad wise, text ads show up in the middle of the messages.

## Forums.devshed.com

This site is probably the best place to visit to get answers to queries on PHP (4,50,000+ posts), MySQL (1,00,000+ posts) and other Web-related software. The coverage of MS software is limited, but still substantial (30,000 posts in Visual Basic sub forum). Some of the other sub forums that cover Java and JavaScript (about 75,000 posts each), C (1,00,000+ posts) and HTML programming (90,000+ posts).

There are quite a few ads, but thankfully they do not show up in the middle of the page.



PHP and MySQL help

## Codeguru.com/forum/

This is another programming support site. But its forte lies in MS programming tools. The Visual C++ sub forum has over 8,30,000 posts and the Visual Basic 6 sub forum has over 2,00,000 posts. Besides, there are well stocked sub forums on C++ and .Net languages. A couple of ads are all that are seen.



Screenshot 12 : forum at codeguru.com.jpg

## forum.notebookreview.com

As the name suggests this site emphasises on portables. With about 2,60,000+ posts under the sub forum titled "Which Notebook Should I Buy?" the target audience is obvious. There are sub forums dedicated to major manufacturers as well.



forum.notebookreview.com.jpg

### **Thinkdigit.com/forum/**

Arguably the deepest and widest Indian tech forum can be found at thinkdigit.com—the online presence of Digit magazine. The forum is quite active and well stocked with members, queries and answers. However, those seeking solutions to programming queries will be disappointed. A quick survey reveals that the site has many active members and queries are answered relatively quickly. The most active subforums are QnA (1,45,000+ posts) and Hardware troubleshooting (68,000+ posts)

### **Broadbandforum.in**

This site primarily focuses on exchanging views on Internet Service Providers in India. It is also a good site to find reviews of Cable TV and DTH providers. Another site that has similar content is vinuthomas.com/forums.html, though it is heavily skewed towards discussion on BSNL services.

### **Other Web Sites**

**forums.pcper.com:** Inexplicably there are 12,50,000+ posts under the “AMD Motherboards” sub forum. Other sub forums getting attention cater to Gaming, Overclocking, Modding, Graphics cards, and CPUs—each with over 1,00,000 posts.

**hardware.mcse.ms:** Not a Microsoft supported site. There are many sub forums on the site, each of which is linked to a newsgroup. For example, the Computer Tech Support sub forum (2,68,000+ posts) is linked to the 24hoursupport.helpdesk newsgroup.

**mac-forums.com:** probably the best alternative to the community at apple.com, which has already been mentioned.

**cybertechhelp.com/forums:** has 1,00,000+ posts under Hardware and Windows XP sub forums each.

What becomes obvious at this point is that there are many sites/forums that offer information on different topics, with each having a niche subforum. As mentioned earlier, to find a forum that has the answer it is much easier for Neos to use a general search engine such as Google, rather than go hopping from forum to forum and using the local search facility to find if the answer has been answered already.

### 8.2.3 Newsgroups

#### Alt.comp.freeware

Everyone loves freeware. Downloading, installing, executing and testing it without a moment's consideration. Which is why many malware/spyware dress up as freeware. There are many sites offering freeware downloads, but only a few allow users to post reviews about the application. Freewarefiles.com is one good example of such a site.

Alt.comp.freeware is a newsgroup that is dedicated to the discussion of freeware application. It is an ideal place for Neos to seek opinion about a particularly enticingly described freeware application. If the absence of user reviews for a particular application, this newsgroup is the best place to head to. This is a high activity newsgroup and answers are usually prompt and very relevant. Besides contributing to the newsgroup, the members also vote for the best freeware of the year, included in the Pricelessware.org site. So, one can be assured that the applications on the site are trustworthy.

#### Other Newsgroups

Some other high activity newsgroups related to IT are mentioned below. The subject of discussion can be inferred from the newsgroup name.

LANGUAGES: comp.lang.c, comp.lang.c++, comp.lang.java.programmer, comp.lang.javascript

HARDWARE: alt.comp.hardware.pc-homebuilt, alt.comp.hardware, 24hoursupport.helpdesk

LINUX: comp.os.linux.advocacy

COMPUTER GAMES: comp.sys.ibm.pc.games.action

There are many other newsgroups which address other tech areas and the entire list can be accessed at <http://groups.google.com/groups/dir>.

### 8.2.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is evident that most of the well stocked sites/forums are not based out of India. While a large database of answers will be of help to Neos, the Pros would be doing greater service by frequenting Web sites that are just starting off or do not have a large database yet.

## 8.3 Disposing

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After having used a PC to the point where it begins to show its age and no longer meets the user's computing needs, the user is faced with a problem of finding a use for it. Many dealers will buyback the old PC and offer a discount on the new one. A few other options are discussed next.

### 8.4.1 Sale/Barter

#### Bazaar forum on Thinkdigit.com

This is a good site to find bargain hunting buyers or others who are willing to barter. The sub forum is quite active with many used computer components on offer by users. Though 1600+ offers are listed, since many completed transactions continue to be listed, the number of actual open offers is lower. While thinkdigit.com is the medium, it is not liable for the conduct of the parties involved in the transaction (which holds true for all sites offering such a facility).

#### Techarena.in

This is another Indian tech site that has a dedicated sub forum for trading in computer components. Currently, there are about 700 threads listed.

#### Computers.ebay.in

Admittedly, this is probably the best place to sell and buy used stuff (new stuff always costs more on ebay than what is available locally). While the selling process used to be quite straight forward earlier, presently, ebay insists that sellers signup for its Paisapay service as a prerequisite, an online money transaction service like Paypal. But, in return, eBay will insure the transaction allowing buyers to part with their money with assured security.

### Other sites

#### Techtree.com:

This site also allows registered users to put up classifieds.

Olx.in, geo.craigslist.org/iso/in, used-computer.vivastreet.co.in

/laptop-computers: Other places to find bargains or buyers.

### 8.3.2 Donation

If stingy buyers do not offer a handsome figure for your beloved used rig, you may as well donate it. At least, you will have the moral satisfaction of not surrendering to the whims of the bargain hunters. Some organisations that accept donations in the form of computers are mentioned below.

#### Ashanet.org

Asha for Education is a wide spread organisation involved in social

**About Asha Projects Chapters Get Involved Donate Resources Contact Us**

**Contact Us**

--- Jump to Chapter ---  
[US Chapters](#) | [India Chapters](#) | [Rest of the World](#) | [All Chapters](#)

Chapter	Location/General Info	Contact	Name	Email	Phone
<a href="#">Ballia</a>	Vill. + Po. Reoti Ballia, U.P. 277209 India	Coordinator	Vijay Kumar Pandey	ashaballia AT yahoo DOT com	91-5494-260235 9335341150

Donate your old computers to worthy causes

activities. It has many offices in India besides other countries. In India it has a presence in cities such as Bangalore, Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai, Pune, Kolkata and others. The contact details are available on the site or you can visit <http://www.ashanet.org/index.php?page=contacts&c=India>

#### Aidindia.org

Association for India's Development is another social service

**Association for India's Development**  
 Courage. Commitment. Change

10 Calendar 2009 **Petition to Support People's Struggle against Forced Displacement in Jangal Singhpur, Orissa**

haven't slept the whole night fearing police action, very tense situation as you can imagine.

[Sign Petition](#) | [Read Background](#) | [See film](#)

Aiding India, with technology

organisation that seeks donations in the form of PCs. It has many chapters spread across the globe. In India, its chapters are in Bangalore, Hyderabad, Pune and a few other cities besides the four metros. Each chapter has a subdomain in the main site such as [delhi.aidindia.org](http://delhi.aidindia.org) and [kolkata.aidindia.org](http://kolkata.aidindia.org) etc with details on how to donate.

### Other Options

Another Web site seeking PC donations is [smilengo.org](http://smilengo.org) but it only operates in West Bengal.

Last, but not the least, the clichéd statement again—Google is the only page that is needed to find techhelp. A more rigorous search will yield information about other organisations needing PCs. Of course, it is always possible that the next door charity organisation does not have an online presence, and yet needs a PC. It is prudent to delete personal information from the hard disk before donating the PC. Using specialised software to ensure thorough data overwrite is recommended.

### 8.3.3 Recycling

If the PC breaks down with no hope of repair for want of spares, it should be recycled. Unfortunately, very few PC recycling plants exist in India and there is no legislation to control how PCs are to be disposed. So, the local raddiwalla can relieve you of the burden of the dead PC, just as larger raddiwallas relieve foreign companies of their dead PCs by importing them.

Evidently, Ramky (<http://www.ramkyenviroengineers.com/>) is the sole Indian company involved in recycling eWaste in India, and have (or are building) two recycling plants in Chennai and Bangalore. Those conscientious about the environmental effects of inappropriate disposal of PC components can contact the recycling plants, if they do find the contact address.

Sharing the experience on any of the sites/forums covered in this chapter would be quite helpful for others who intend to follow the same path.



## 8.4 Conclusion

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“Tech Help” can be viewed as being much more than just solving either a hardware or software problem and encompassing all the areas where a person will need an informed opinion with regard to hardware or software. We have attempted to cover the entire product-user interaction cycle in this chapter.

# Online Services



**A**ll over the world people are teeming with ideas to make information access easier, more reliable, secure and enjoyable. Information technology is the field where software, hardware and telecommunications converge. This convergence has fuelled a growth spurt in each component of information technology causing a chain-reaction which spirals the growth of

other components of information technology.

This chain reaction has caused an explosion in the Internet and because of this explosion and congregation of technologies and ideas; the Web has now become notorious for services which were once the domain of software which ran on PCs under the heading of packages and utilities. We thought of trying our hand at some of these services and were amazed. Three of these services are explored in this chapter.

## 9.1 Online File Storage

---

If you are the person who has a business operation spanning countries or even cities, or if you're someone who the traveling bug has bitten badly, and needs to access large amounts of data wherever you go, You're going to need online file storage services. Besides this, if you find that your e-mail service has an attachment limit that's just too small for your liking, again, online storage is for you.

Other advantages of these services include security against virus attacks and data corruption—even backing up to CDs fails every now and then. Some of the sites we will look at are free, while others offer both free and paid options.

If you do not want the hassles of upgrading to new hardware every time you run out of disk space, or when storage technology changes, you should consider online storage as an option for storing, accessing and sharing your data.

With all of these sites you get a few GB of storage, so you don't have to worry about the size of the data you are backing up or just sharing. In addition, some sites have rules against objectionable content, which are adhered to strictly.

On the more technical side, the memberships to some of these Web sites also offer more facilities in terms of downloads per hour, maximum storage allowed, support for download accelerators, password protection for each download, choice of HTTP or FTP download, and sending files to multiple recipients. Moreover, you can also choose to share your files with the

world—free public access.

We tried six of these services: MegaUpload, RapidShare, YourFileHost, Xdrive and Cyn.

### 9.1.1 MegaUpload (www.megaupload.com)

We found that MegaUpload is leading the online storage race. Using this site is simple enough. You don't have to join or register or anything like that to upload files to it. From the main page just click the browse button and select the file you want to upload. After the



MegaUpload, loads of storage space

upload completes you can see a link on the next page just about where the browse button was on the previous page. Copy this link to a file on your PC. To download your file, simply paste it in the browser's address bar and the download begins. It's really that easy!

The site tells you about a hotlink package, which if subscribed to, makes downloading easier. This facility causes the file to be downloaded like an FTP download, without needing to open the MegaUpload site.

If you want your own space on the site, you will have to sign up for membership. Just sign up by entering your personal details including your e-mail address, and the site will send you a confirmation link, and clicking it will activate your account. Now, to upload files use the same browse button from the main page as described earlier. Premium users are offered more in terms of storage, and uploading is still just as simple.

You are allowed 500 MB uploads for non-members, 1 GB for regular members, while premium members have no restrictions—unlimited file size, subject to storage limits of course. Storage space is capped at a whopping 250 GB for premium members, 50 GB for members, while non-members can only download files or

upload individual files.

MegaUpload offers its services at a range of prices—\$9.99 for a 1 month membership, \$59.99 for a year, and even \$199.99 for a lifetime platinum membership. It even offers reward points for premium users, which translate into free uploads depending on the number of points accrued. On signup itself it offers 9000 reward points free.

It has a cool GUI with buttons to view statistics such as the previous 100 downloads, the top 10 uploads as well as the top 10 downloads, world statistics for each file being downloaded in the case of files which are available for public access. Some of these buttons are, however, enabled for premium users only.

As a bonus the MegaUpload site offers a toolbar as well as a turbo utility free, which enable batch uploads and provide their own support for resuming broken downloads. We tried using the toolbar on an occasion when the site said that network traffic constraints were preventing file download with a free account and we were impressed. This means that with the toolbar you get priority for your download as much as a premium user does.

### 9.1.2 RapidShare (www.rapidshare.com)

RapidShare is another popular site which offers unlimited number of file uploads. To use this site click on the browse button to select the file you want to upload and then click on the upload button. The site then takes you to



Sharing files with friends, rapidly

a page which gives you two links one to download the file and another to delete it from the site if you need to. You can download the file using the download link and delete the file by entering the delete link in the browser's address bar. When you enter the delete

link, the file is deleted and to confirm this, a message box pops up. Below, on the same page you are given the option to get a collectors account. This is the free-members area which requires you to provide your e-mail address and personal details to get and account.

Alternatively you could get a free membership from the free zone menu item on the first page. If you get a membership, you get access to a space on the site in which you can see a list of your files, and you can add more files or delete those you don't need any more. The site uses SSL encryption for uploads, so you're assured of secure file transfers. Premium memberships require the same procedure to upload files. When you download the file, it asks you if you are a free member or a premium member. Click the appropriate button, and then choose a mirror to get faster download speeds. To prevent against robots and scripts wasting bandwidth, you are required to enter text that's shown visually to you to confirm that you're human. Click on the 'download via mirror' link, and you get your file.

RapidShare has a size limit of 100 MB per file. Larger files have to be split using a utility like FileSplitter, and then individual components uploaded. Premium users, however, are allocated a 2 GB file-size limit. You can get a RapidShare premium membership for 16.99 (Euros) for 3 months and 54.99 for 1 year.

### 9.1.3 YourFileHost (www.yourfilehost.com)

YourFileHost is another amazing site which offers unlimited uploads, but allows a file-size of a mere 25 MB. Unfortunately, this site does not have a "premium" option, and is sustained by advertising and donations from its users.

To use this site, click on the upload link on the main



YourFileHost: small file sizes

page and then on the add files to upload button. Select the files to upload and then select 'general' or 'adult' on the GUI—making it compulsory for you to specify whether your file is for general viewers or adult viewers only. Once this is done, you can click on the upload button and your files are uploaded to the site. The next page gives you the download and delete links.

As before, to download the file enter the download link in the browser's address bar and to delete the file from the server, just enter the delete link. Since there's no membership option, you need to store these links carefully. Of course, this site is totally free, so we can't really fault them for "not charging" us.

If you're planning on sharing files for official use, you might want to steer clear of YourFileHost, because it's mostly a video site, and most of those videos are adult oriented. You would probably look a little unprofessional telling colleagues or clients to download a file from here. If it's just your friends that you're sharing files with, especially videos, this site is fun—especially the general section, where you'll find a whole range of really funny videos.

### 9.1.4 Xdrive (www.xdrive.com)

Xdrive is another site that offers 5 GB of free online storage with an unlimited number of file uploads. The catch here is that you need an AOL account to access the site. Needless to say, this site has been developed by AOL. It also has a paid option which offers up to 50 GB of storage at \$9.95 a month and \$99.50 a year.

Once you get an AOL account, which is pretty simple, you get access to an online storage with what we think is the best GUI among the sites we have spoken about here. When you sign in, you are shown your Xdrive folders visually. Click



Does the XDrive hold the Xfiles?

on the link, and you will find a snazzy toolbar to help you upload all your files. Click on the upload button on the toolbar, select your files and click OK to upload. You can download multiple files at once using the GUI, by selecting files the way you select e-mails, and then click Download.

This site also doubles up as a miniature Web album (more on Web albums later in this chapter). Simply move the pictures you upload to the My Photos folder, click on the photos tab on the GUI, and voila the toolbar changes. You can view the pictures as a slideshow or even share them if you wish. Xdrive also offers the amazing facility to upload all your e-mail attachments coming in to your AOL e-mail account to your Xdrive account directly.

It offers utility software which helps a user to combine music and picture files to create rich multimedia experiences. Also, it offers another utility with a GUI that features drag and drop functionality.

### 9.1.5 Cyn

Cyn is the last online storage site we cover here. This site from Cynapse offers up to 25 MB of storage as it's free option and gives two users access to an account. There is a paid option, which offers up to 5 GB of storage. In this case, the cost of the paid membership depends on the number of users accessing the account. It varies from \$30 per user, per month for 2-9 users to \$20 per user, per month for 500 and above users. It also offers a 3-month option with 10% savings, a 6-month option with 15% savings and a 1-year option with 20% savings on total cost of membership.

This site doesn't have a non-members account, but does offer free membership. Sign up using your e-mail address and personal details and you are sent a link to your e-mail address for verification. Once you click on the link you are asked to enter the number of users who will use your site. The next bit is really interesting. Cyn asks you for a site name. That's right; a site name for you. The advantage that Cyn gives you is to purchase a site. This means that it gives you a site with your own domain name for your account. For instance, if Digit would purchase an account with Cyn, the domain name of the site could be <http://www.digit.cyn.in>. This is a cool feature



for people who are brand-conscious when it comes to the Web.

Next comes up a page saying that resources and space are being allocated for your site. Once this is done you are through. You get your own space on Cyn to which you can upload files. The process is once again the same, which is to select, upload, and store. To download the files, simply select them and download.

### 9.1.6 Where To Store

We would suggest that if you have many files of a large size, sign up with MegaUpload. Its 50 GB space would cover the requirements for most people. If you are a traveling businessman, or if you want to share files with people across the globe, try RapidShare—its mirroring facilities make for faster downloads across the world. For just fun with friends, and sharing videos or files while you surf, the YourFileHost service should suffice.

We recommend Xdrive for its ease of use and look and feel. The downside is that it offers only 5 GB of storage free. However, it's much less ominous a site than the first three when it comes to official work—MegaUpload, RapidShare, and YourFileHost have become notorious for warez and porn... Cyn works for businesses that are brand conscious, and those who come across as more serious about online-storage. It's way too expensive though.

## 9.2 Online Messenger Services

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Yahoo! Messenger, MSN Messenger, AOL, ICQ, etc. You've obviously heard of these services, because we all seem to use one or the other to keep in touch with friends and colleagues from across the globe. They became so popular, that companies had to get their firewalls to block these services to get any work done. As usual, technology always finds a way, and online messenger services were born.

Apart from allowing you to chat from places you shouldn't, these services are platform independent, and so, you can even sit on a Linux-based PC and use MSN messenger. Also, with so many

versions of Windows being used right now, it takes away the hassle of upgrading or finding the right messenger version for your OS. All you need is a browser and a connection to the Internet, and you can chat away to glory.

### 9.2.1 Meebo (www.meebo.com)

Meebo is the first messenger service we cover here. Go to the site and enter your e-mail ID and password in the appropriate place and sign in. This site offers a one stop point on the WWW from where you can access messenger services such



**Meebo, a multi-messenger**

as Yahoo!, MSN, AIM and Google, and also offers its own Meebo messenger service.

This site offers multiplexed messenger services as its service—when you sign in, a smaller window appears which has a GUI similar to the respective messenger software. Once signed in to Meebo, you can add and delete contacts, IM an individual or groups, and do basically anything you normally do with your messenger software.

Your contact lists are sorted just as they are in the messaging software. Chatting is also just as simple as selecting a contact, typing something to them and pressing [Enter]. We found no problems with any of Meebo's services.

### 9.2.2 I Love IM (www.iloveim.com)

ILoveIM (ILIM) is a similar service which also offers a multiplex of the same services, along with its own chat service. There's very little to differentiate the two actually, except that ILIM offers a few extra features than Meebo in chat windows. For example, if you sign in to MSN, you can choose whether to display or hide offline

contacts, see contact pictures, etc.

Like Meebo, ILoveIM also has a different window for Yahoo! users. The option to personalise your profile, however, does not exist on the Yahoo! service GUI. Also, similar to Meebo, the contacts are divided only into friends and others, while the MSN service GUI allows you to specify family, friends and other contacts.

### 9.2.3 eBuddy (www.eBuddy.com)

eBuddy (until recently, called eMessenger) is another multiplexed online messenger service. Using this service is pretty much similar to using the Meebo and ILoveIM services, but this site offers a few extra gimmicks. For instance sign in to the MSN service and you will see a link to access your e-mail. When you click this link, a browser window opens up and you are logged in to your Hotmail account.

On the Yahoo! service one has the option of sending IMs and inviting people to a conference. This service does not specify contacts as family or friends on its MSN service. It has contacts as offline and online on its MSN service and as friends and others on its Yahoo! service.

eBuddy also has a mobile version of their messenger service, so you can use pretty much any GPRS/EDGE capable phone and stay available on IM no matter where you are. Point your mobile browser to <http://get.ebuddy.com> to download it to your phone.

### 9.2.4 MSN (webmessenger.msn.com)

MSN messenger has its own online service, which is obviously not multiplexed. You can sign-in to MSN Messenger, and have access to all of your MSN account settings by visiting <http://webmessenger.msn.com>. This is



MSN's Web messaging service

the most feature-rich MSN Web messenger service though, and we're not surprised. Microsoft would obviously be the most qualified to build and integrate its own services into a Web browser interface. Apart from chatting (obviously), you can also access your e-mail, add contacts, search the Web, etc. Overall, if you use only MSN messenger to keep in touch with family, friends and colleagues, look no further than MSN's Web Messenger service.

### 9.2.5 ICQ

ICQ is an excellent online messaging service that you can sign up for. ICQ is one of the oldest online messenger services available on the Web. Apart from the usual chat service, this site offers entry into chat rooms, communities and hobby groups so that like-minded people can get together and chat with each other. There are even games to play at this site, making it much more than a mere Web messenger service.

When you sign up for this service, you are given a number which you can use to chat with people. You can chat with other friends on ICQ or join one of the various communities or groups mentioned here and spend those leisurely hours. The communities vary based on religion, nationality, age groups, gender, etc. You can even start your own community, invite your friends and form your own online group of like-minded people. To gain brownie points, ICQ also offers you an e-mail account, which is as good as any of the other services available.

## 9.3 Web Albums

Are you an amateur or professional shutterbug? All of us have our fondest memories captured in stills—first steps, weddings, birthdays, graduation, etc. Now you can either choose to flood your friends and family members with e-mails and large attachments, or use Web albums. With the exponential increase in popularity of digital cameras, people are sharing more photographs than ever before. Until a few years ago, this was always via e-mail, with us sending several MBs worth of pictures to anyone who we thought might want to see them. Today, everyone uses Web albums, and

let's the people who are interested, come to the photographs, instead of making you send the photographs to everyone. Also, if you consider yourself to be a digital Michelangelo, you can try and make your work known to the world by hosting your pictures on Web albums.

The sites offer people the facilities to organise, edit, share, print, backup pictures and create albums online. With these sites you can maintain pictures in sets, do things like changing picture resolution, collating pictures to make albums and printing those albums or burning them to CDs. Also, similar to the online file storage services, these sites have rules against objectionable content being uploaded.

### 9.3.1 Flickr

Flickr is the Web album developed by Yahoo!. Using Flickr is easy enough—use your Yahoo! Id, sign in, and you are ready to go. The pictures can be uploaded as easily as uploading files as attachments to emails. When you are signed in, click in



Flickr is more than a Web album

the upload photos link and you will be taken to the upload page. Click on choose photos and select the pictures you wish to upload. Next, click on the upload photos link and the pictures will be uploaded. Once the pictures have been uploaded, there are several things you can do with them. You can group the pictures into sets, add blogs to them and even edit them. Yahoo has tied up with a site called Picnik to provide photo-editing facilities for its users. This means rotating, resizing and even adjusting resolution can be done on Flickr.

Apart from this you can share pictures with friends, family and even the general public. If you do not want people to see your pic-

tures, then simply mark them as private. Flickr offers yet another interesting feature—it lets you specify where your pictures have been taken using maps and then lets you see other public pictures that have been taken nearby. If you wish, you can make eCards, photo-books and collate pictures to make collages as well.

Flickr has an upload limit of 100 MB of pictures per month and a limit of 5 MB file-size for each picture. However it offers unlimited uploads in its pro account. Priced at \$24.95 for a 1-year account and \$47.99 for a 2-year account, it also offers increased file-size limit of 10 MB, unlimited bandwidth and ad-free browsing for members.

### 9.3.2 WebAPhoto

WebAPhoto is another online Web album service that offers the facility to store, organise, and edit pictures online. It offers storage for an unlimited number of pictures and high quality photo-prints. Similar to Flickr, you can make eCards and transfer pictures easily to your cell phone as well. Like Flickr this site offers you the feature of sharing your pictures with others.

Signing up for this service is just as simple. Provide your e-mail id and personal details and you are a member of this site. Once signed in, click on the NEW link to create a new album. Once you have created a new album, click on the upload photos link on the left of the page. You will be taken to the next page. Click on any of the browse buttons, select the pictures you wish to upload and click OK. Thumbnail-sized images appear in the album. You can even rotate the images if you desire.

To share the pictures click on the 'share this album' link to the left of the page and you will be prompted for e-mail addresses of the people you wish to send the pictures to. Enter e-mail addresses separated by semi-colons, enter a subject line and a message and click on send. The recipients will receive links to your pictures and can view them at their leisure.

### 9.3.3 Xdrive

We covered Xdrive earlier as an online storage option, but that's not all it does. Xdrive also doubles as an online Web album service.

It not only offers people the facility to store their files, but also the facility to upload pictures and create photo-albums as well. Signing in requires an AOL account, which, as mentioned, can be created with the help of this site. Once you're signed in, click on the 'manage my drives' image and you will be taken to a GUI similar to an e-mail folder display page.

Click on the photos tab and the toolbar changes to facilitate uploading pictures. Upload pictures using the upload button on the toolbar. Once the pictures have been uploaded you can even generate a slideshow of your pictures. Sharing pictures is similar to WebAPhoto. You are taken to a page where you can enter e-mail addresses and a subject line. Xdrive then provides the e-mail recipients with links to the pictures that can be used by them to view the same.

### 9.3.4 Picasa

Picasa is owned by Google, and it's not really an online service. You need to download the Picasa software, which offers features similar to Flickr. With Picasa, you download the software, and then register on the Picasa Web site.

Picasa is both impressive and fun to use. The software offers the features to organise and edit your pictures just like the online Web albums do, but there are other features in Picasa which are equally impressive. The first thing this software does when installed is to make a compilation of all the pictures in your PC. It provides two options—one, to organise all the pictures in your PC or two, only the images in the My Documents and My Pictures folders. When you start using Picasa you will want to create your own albums. The next thing that strikes you is to e-mail your albums to people. But it doesn't stop here. With Picasa you



**Picasa: both online and offline**

can add blogs to your albums, and print and collate as well. You can use the buttons on the bottom toolbar for this purpose.

Like Xdrive's Web album, Picasa offers to show you a slideshow of the pictures in your album. This feature is not extended to albums alone. When Picasa organises all the pictures on your PC, depending upon your choice, you can do a slideshow of all the pictures for your viewing pleasure. Picasa offers another interesting feature—it arranges your pictures into timelines, which means that you can attach a date and a time to them. You can also import your pictures directly from a scanner or cell phone and even burn CDs of your albums and gift them to people. Last, but not the least, with Picasa you can make your own screensavers out of your albums and run them on your PC.

### 9.3.5 WebAlbumMaker

WebAlbumMaker is another great software that enables you to make photo albums, but isn't an online service. This software is pretty lightweight, but doesn't offer much in terms of features. Like Picasa it is freeware, and can be easily downloaded from its Web site. It helps you compose a very professional looking photo-gallery and publish it on the Web in just a few easy steps and then share it with your family and friends.

With WebAlbumMaker you can add pictures to and delete them from your photo-album. There is provision for rotating images to the left and to the right as well. You can collate pictures with this software, but not import them from other media such as scanners and cell phones. There is no facility to print the albums out as you would do so with Picasa. Neither is there a provision to burn CDs with it. All-in-all, it gives the basic facilities of making photo-albums and collating pictures.

### 9.3.6 Ornj

Ornj is another great site which provides software to develop photo-albums. Like Picasa and WebAlbumMaker, this isn't an online service either. Its software Web Album Generator is capable of creating a high quality album which you would be proud to show your family and friends.



Similar to WebAlbumMaker, you can add pictures to and delete them from your photo-album. There is also provision for rotating images to the left and to the right as well. You cannot collate pictures with this software, and unlike Picasa, not import them from other media such as scanners and cell phones. Similar to WebAlbumMaker, there is no facility to print the albums out. Neither is there a provision to burn CDs with it. What you can do is sort your pictures and make photo-albums.

### 9.3.7 Summing Up

We found Flickr to be the best online Web album site in terms of features. WebAPhoto is good, but offers services that seem basic compared to Flickr. Xdrive has the advantage of doubling as an online storage service as well, it has a very cool GUI which makes using this site really fun, but it is even more basic than WebAPhoto when it comes to features. This site was intended initially as an online storage service, but with some enhancements in its features, it could lead the market—let's hope the company realises that as well.

Among the software-cum-Web services, Picasa is undoubtedly the best in terms of the facilities that Web album software should provide. WebAlbumMaker and WebAlbumGenerator could do with more enhancements, but are pretty lightweight as compared to Picasa.